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Hawkeye Harry, THE YOUNG TRAPPER RANGER.

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AUTHOR OF "VAGABOND JOE," "THE DUMB SPY,"
"ANTELOPE ABE," "KEEN-KNIFE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I. HAWKEYE HARRY.

THE geographical formation of that portion of our country lying between the Mississippi and Missouri rivers, and south of the forty-third degree of north latitude, now comprising the State of Iowa, furnishes a vast field for the pen of the romancer. Though devoid of bold scenery and wild, mountainous ruggedness, it presents a romantic picturesqueness which the hand of the Creator has modified to a degree well calculated to awaken enthusiastic admiration.

Grand prairies roll away in billowy undulations from the background of the landscape. These are diversified by meandering rivers that find an outlet in the Mississippi or Missouri; many of them flowing through long vistas of deep forests. Small clumps or "mottes" of timber dot the great expanse like islands in the ocean, and here and there innumerable small lakes lie glimmering upon the bosom of the plain like tiny jewels.

This portion of the land of the great North-

west was once the paradise of the red-man. There he lived in all his characteristic laziness and savage glory. Then the woods abounded with game and the rivers and lakes with fish, and he took them without fear or contention. But, at last, the crack of the white man's rifle awoke him from his dreams of savage bliss and aroused him to action. All the jealousy of his nature was excited. Grasping his tomahawk and scalping-knife, he went forth to meet the intruders who had come to hunt and trap upon his grounds.

From that time dark shadows went flitting through the woods or stealing over the plains like spirits of evil. The air was rife with the presence of death, but, despite its peril, the bold hunter and hardy pioneer pressed forward to contend with the red-man, and plant the seed of civilization.

Our story opens when the settlers had gained a firm foothold in the eastern portion of the territory, and many daring trappers had penetrated to the very heart of the "Indian country."

With two of those fearless men our story especially deals.

It was in October, and the day was near its close.

Down in a little valley on the banks of a purling stream that found its way into the crystal waters of Lake Boyer, stood a curious-looking structure built entirely of stone, and in the form of a cone. It was small, but firmly constructed, showing the unmistakable handwork of the white man. A door in the side looked down the valley, and its sides were pierced by numerous loop-holes.

The location was well selected for this rude trapper-home, the valley being inclosed by high, rugged bluffs, whose face was covered with clustering parasites and prickly ash. It could be entered by one course only, and that was by following up the little stream which found its source within the valley, and was fed by numerous springs.

On the day and hour in question the figure of one of the occupants of that conical structure issued from within, and, pausing just without, swept the valley and hills around him with an eagle-like glance.

He was a youth, probably in his eighteenth year. His form was not overly large for one of his age, but perfectly developed in all the attributes of manhood. His broad shoulders, deep chest, and muscular limbs denoted strength, and the quick glance of the eye and the ease and grace of movement were indicative of suppleness and activity; and all these, taken together, were proofs of high health and vigor. His face wore an expression of great firmness and decision. It was handsome, but bronzed to the hue of an Indian's by exposure to sun and wind.

He was dressed in a complete suit of buckskin, with the exception of his cap. This was a decidedly odd affair, made of the feathered skin of a gray hawk.

From this novel cap, and the remarkable keenness of his vision, Harry Houston, the young trapper and ranger, had been styled "Hawkeye Harry" by his friends.

He was armed with a rifle, knife and tomahawk, and, as he was in the midst of an enemy's country, it required great precaution to guard against a surprise by the cunning foe; hence his careful survey of the valley and bluffs around him on issuing from the conical hut.

"How is 't, Hawkeye?" called a voice from within, when the youth had scanned the surrounding bluffs; "see any red-skins hanging around?"

"No," replied the young trapper; "it's not likely they'd let themselves be seen if they were about."

"In course they'd keep hid, if they could," returned his companion; "but I've known 'em eyes o' yourn to see a red-skin thro' a 'en-foot rock, and—"

"Hold on, old friend, you're going t' extremes now," said Hawkeye Harry; "an' as I've no time to spare, I believe I'll run down to the lake and look after the traps."

"Well, if ye do, Harry, keep yer eyes skinned, fur I have every reason to believe thar's red-skins hankerin' arter our skulps. Old Optic is no greeny in sich matters."

"All right, Optic, I'll take your advice," said our hero, and throwing his rifle across his shoulder, he set off at a rapid pace down the valley.

In his haste, however, he did not forget the injunction of his friend, and kept a wary watch about him. He would have done this without his friend's advice, for few were better posted in woodcraft and Indian cunning than the

young woodsman, and through force of habit, precaution had become second nature to him.

He soon reached an open plateau where the little creek debouched from the valley. Here he left the stream, and crossing the opening plunged into the deep woods beyond. A few minutes' walk now brought him to the lake, around whose shore he had set a number of traps.

Having made certain that no lurking enemies were about, either upon the bosom of the lake or in the woods, he began a careful examination of his traps. The first one he came to he found contained an otter. Securing the animal, he reset the trap and moved on to the second. But here he met with a disappointment. The trap was sprung and showed signs of having contained an otter, but it was gone. He would have thought no more about it than that the animal had escaped had he not made another discovery. Human tracks were in the sand upon the beach, and it required but a single glance to tell him that they were made by the moccasined feet of an Indian.

"By George!" he exclaimed, "Old Optic is right. The red-skins are around, darn their thieving pictures! And now I might as well pack my traps to the Cone, and turn my attention to Indian-hunting and red scalps. But I'll see where these tracks lead to, first."

Dropping his rifle in the hollow of his left arm, the youth followed the imprints around the lake shore. They led him to the third trap, which he saw had been robbed also. But here the red robber had quit the lake shore, and turned off into the woods. The young trapper followed his trail, and, to his surprise, soon discovered that the thief had been joined by a number of other Indians.

Hawkeye Harry followed on. The trail was broad and plain, and he was thereby enabled to move quite rapidly. But the shadows of evening were beginning to gather over the forest, and it would not be long before darkness would conceal the trail. However, as it was fresh, he had hopes of overhauling the party before darkness set in.

The main object of his pursuit was to ascertain whether the savages were a war or a hunting-party, and to what tribe they belonged. By gaining this information he would be enabled to judge of the magnitude of the danger and trouble to which he and his old friend Optic would be exposed.

With every faculty on the alert, he pressed forward, and just as the sun was going down he was brought to a sudden halt by sight of a thin, white wreath of smoke floating up from the tree-tops a short distance in advance of him.

He at once concluded that the Indians he was following had halted for the night, and that the smoke was rising from their camp-fire. So, leaving the trail, he began a careful reconnaissance of the place where he supposed the encampment to be. But to his surprise he found neither Indians nor fire.

Then he thought he might have been mistaken in the smoke; but, upon a more careful survey of the surroundings, he saw that he had not been deceived.

Above the top of the very tree—a giant basswood—under which he was standing, he saw thin wreaths of smoke rising upward and drifting away in the breeze.

But, from whence did it originate? There was no sign of fire about. The tree showed no break in the surface of its bark for fully fifty feet above where the first limbs put out. There was nothing suspicious about the tree, yet it was a mystery where the smoke came from.

Near by, a little creek went rippling over its stony bed, and poured its waters into the Boyer river a few rods away; and while Harry stood pondering over the mystery of the smoke, his practiced ear caught the sound of swashing water—a sound that was not natural, and that broke suddenly and harshly upon his ear.

The sound emanated from water flowing below where he stood! Glancing around, he was not a little startled by seeing a black object heave upward in the center of the creek by some unknown power!

At that point, the creek was over ten feet wide and scarcely two inches in depth. A few feet lower down, the water rushed over a kind of rapids, the foot of which was some fifteen feet below the surface of the stream above the rapids.

Hawkeye Harry fixed his eyes upon the black object so mysteriously thrust upward from the bed of the creek, but the gathering shadows of evening prevented him from gaining a definite knowledge of its true nature. He was possessed

of little of that superstition so characteristic of border-men, and was on the point of advancing to examine the strange object more closely when a new sight caused him to start back into the shadows, with sudden alarm.

CHAPTER II.

MORE MYSTERIES.

It was a strange, fearful object—some living creature—a black, hairy mass, that arose from the very bed of the creek.

Was it a human or was it a beast? was it either? the young trapper asked himself; but the next instant, before he could arrive at any definite decision, he was startled by a low scream, like that of a panther. The sound came from the dense thicket on the opposite side of the stream, not over three rods away, and clutching his rifle in a firm grasp, he turned his eyes upon the thicket, expecting to see, the next moment, a panther come bounding from its covert toward him. But he was happily disappointed. No beast made its appearance, nor was the scream repeated.

Slowly his head was turned, and his eyes again sought for that fearful form that he had seen rise from the bed of the stream; but, to his surprise, it was gone! Even the black object, which had at first made its appearance, had vanished as mysteriously as it had come, and the water was rippling as smoothly on as when he had first gazed upon its bosom.

Harry, considerably mystified by what he had seen and heard, resolved to know what it all meant. For the first time, he had witnessed that for which he could not account. Without the slightest fear, he pushed out from his covert and waded into the stream.

As before stated, the water was not over two inches in depth, and being clear as crystal, he was enabled to see every pebble in the stony bottom, despite the gathering shadows. But, on reaching the point where the mysterious creature had arisen, he was surprised to find the bed of the creek of solid rock and gravel. There was no sign of an opening in the bottom. All that he did see was that the gravel and sand had been disturbed.

Approaching darkness prevented further investigations, and, regaining his covert on the shore, he resolved to wait a while longer, in hopes of receiving some adequate explanation of the mystery that had baffled him.

Soon after dark the moon came up, and as the shrubbery on the east side of the creek was quite low and sparse, its soft beams fell upon the rippling waters of the stream, and enabled the young trapper to watch closely that point which had so deeply arrested his attention before night.

As the hours wore on, a deep silence came over the woodland, that was unpleasant to the watcher. Such a silence was not natural in the forest at that time. To one versed in woodcraft and nature's voice, it boded danger. Not the chirrup of a cricket, the hum of an insect nor the rustle of a leaf could be heard; and even the ripple of the little stream seemed toned down to a sad murmur.

With every faculty on the alert, Harry waited and watched.

The minutes dragged by on leaden feet.

Then to the ear of the young trapper came a splash, splash in the water in the stream, above where he sat.

The sound was produced by some one or something wading in the bed of the creek. With steady eye he watched for the approach of the unknown.

He soon came—a tall, powerful Indian warrior, naked to the loin-cloth, with plumed head, and face and breast streaked and ringed with war-paint, until he appeared the demon of hideousness.

He clutched a tomahawk in one hand, and was moving in an attitude and manner that denoted extreme caution.

Hawkeye Harry knew he was an enemy to be feared, yet he could not help admiring his tall, powerful form and handsome proportions.

Just opposite Harry the savage stopped and bent his head in the attitude of listening, when something went whirling through the air and struck the savage upon the tufted head. With a wail he staggered forward, and fell full length in the water, where he lay struggling in all the agonies of death for several moments.

Then from the shadows of the opposite side of the stream, the young trapper saw a human figure creep out into the water and approach the prostrate form of the Indian.

The moon shone full upon the scene, but Harry could not tell whether the slayer was a white man or Indian. He was enveloped in the folds of a red blanket, while his head was cov-

ered by a sort of hood, and a veil of long, yellow hair hung down over the face.

Approaching the prostrate body of the savage, the creeping figure bent over it. Then from the folds of the blanket a pair of hands were put out. One of them seized the savage by the scalp-lock, and the other, which held a gleaming knife, described a circle about the dead warrior's head.

Then the figure stood erect. In one hand it held a reeking scalp, and in the other the glittering blade, unstained with blood, so quick had the fearful deed been done.

For a moment the mysterious slayer stood motionless, regarding his ghastly trophy, apparently, with the deepest admiration.

In the moonbeams he appeared a frightful and repulsive object, with his hooded head, veiled face and shrouded form.

Who was he? From whence came he?

Scarcely had these questions taken form, when the unknown figure spurned the dead body of the savage with his foot, and then turning and going a few paces down the creek, he stopped and exclaimed aloud:

"Another Sioux scalp for the Unknown! Oh, food of vengeance!"

Hawkeye Harry started. That voice sounded strangely familiar to him. He would have sworn it was that of his friend, Old Optic. But, if it was not his, the remarkable similarity of voices was a strange coincidence indeed.

For some time Harry remained undecided as to how he should act, and before he could arrive at any definite conclusion, he saw fully a score of Indian warriors leap—from the very air it seemed—in a circle around the Unknown! A war-whoop awoke the awful silence of the woods as twenty tomahawks were raised aloft in the air to strike the veiled avenger down.

"Twenty to one are too many," said Hawkeye Harry, to himself, all the courage of his heart aroused, and raising his rifle, he glanced quickly along the barrel and fired.

A savage fell dead, and simultaneous with his fall, Harry saw the Unknown avenger sink down—swallowed up in the creek from mortal view; he heard the rush and roar of waters around him, and terror-stricken by the shot from behind, and the sudden disappearance of the Unknown, he saw the savages shrink back—turn and glide into the friendly shelter of their native haunts.

For several moments Harry remained motionless, pondering over the mysteries of the wild drama he had just seen enacted within the little creek; then, as his eyes wandered back to the slain savage in the water, it reminded him of the fact that the Indians would soon recover from their fear and terror, and return in search of him who had fired the shot. So, slinging his rifle over his shoulder, by means of a strap attached to it for that purpose, he drew his hunting-knife, and gliding from his covert, set off on his return to the Cone.

It was not his intention to pursue the course back that he had come, but to endeavor to reach the Cone by a nearer route. He was well acquainted with the topography of the country thereabouts, and having shaped his course, he pressed forward at a rapid pace. But, despite his eagerness and haste, his mind went back to the scenes he had witnessed a few minutes previous. And somehow or other, he could not help confounding the voice of the veiled Unknown with that of his friend Old Optic.

"If Old Optic has had any thing to do with what I have seen to-night," mused our hero, "the fact will be confirmed by his absence from the Cone when I reach there. But if he has any secrets—why I'll open 'em!"

To avoid a wide detour he resolved to cross a deep chasm known among the hunters and trappers as the Black Gorge. This the young trapper had often accomplished, yet at a great risk, for he had to swing himself down the face of one cliff and up the other, by means of the frail parasites that grew thereon. But he never hesitated in the face of such dangers, and at once pushed on toward the gorge.

In a moment he stood upon its brink. He stopped and listened. That ominous silence still hung over the forest, and only the faint roar of water down in the deep rift could be heard. To reach a point where the cliffs were less high, he moved along up the gorge. His attention was arrested by what he had never noticed before. A tree had been uprooted and was lying across the abyss, spanning it from cliff to cliff.

At this point the gorge was some fifty feet deep, and about thirty in width. On the opposite side of the chasm, near where the tree had fallen, stood an elm that had grown outward, at quite an inclination, over the edge of

the cliff, to court the inviting freedom of the opening. A single branch of this tree was thrust outward, and drooping downward, its foliage touched the fallen log near the middle of that part spanning the abyss, thus completely screening from view the opposite end and the cliff.

Here seemed to Harry a streak of luck, for the rude bridge would enable him to cross without going further out of the way.

Arranging his rifle firmly at his back so that he could use both arms freely in maintaining an easy balance, in crossing the log, he stepped upon it and began moving slowly across.

The moon shone full on him, and far down into the black mouth of the gorge, into which a single misstep, the crumbling of a piece of bark under his feet, or even a side glance would precipitate him to a certain death.

The young ranger could feel the swaying of the log under his weight and the vibration of each footfall; but with firm step he felt his way onward, and soon reached the foliage of the elm that hung down over the log. This he carefully pushed aside and passed beyond.

But at that instant he came to a sudden halt. A low cry escaped his lips. There, before him, on the center of the log, over the fearful depths of the abyss, he found himself face to face with a powerful Indian warrior—a deadly foe!

CHAPTER III.

THE BATTLE IN THE AIR.

HAWKEYE HARRY was taken by surprise—the drooping foliage of the elm having concealed the savage from his view until he had drawn the screen aside. And the red-skin seemed as greatly surprised, for it was quite evident that he knew nothing of the young ranger's presence until the curtain of foliage was put aside.

Retreat, however, was impossible for either of the two natural enemies. They could not walk backward, nor could they turn about on the narrow log. Even had such a thing been possible, it was not probable that either of them would have done so, for such foes never shrink nor turn from each other. That would have been a mark of cowardice and fear.

They stood glaring at each other, motionless as statues—like maddened beasts preparing to leap.

Each, with a quick glance, measured the proportion of the other, and a triumphant smile swept over the paint-bedaubed face of the savage, when he had comprehended how inferior was the young pale-face to himself. By his size had the warrior measured the young foe's strength and courage.

Hawkeye Harry well knew that he had a terrible enemy to deal with, and that his salvation lay in one desperate stroke. So he watched the warrior. He saw his right hand slowly and mechanically moving toward his girdle, where his scalping-knife was sheathed. Not a moment was to be lost.

Quick as a flash of lightning, Harry permitted his feet to slip apart, and dropped himself astride of the log, locking his feet on the under side of the log. No sooner had he done this than the savage warrior followed his example and dropped himself astride of the log.

They were now seated upon the fallen tree over the abyss within an arm's length of each other.

Without waiting to draw his knife, Hawkeye Harry drove his clenched fist into the red-skin's face with such force as to make him yell with pain and rage, as he drew his knife and made a desperate pass at his young adversary; but he had reckoned without his host. With great presence of mind, Harry caught the descending arm with his left hand, while, with his right, he dealt the savage a blow in the stomach that caused him to drop his knife in the abyss; but, quick as lightning, he reached forward and they grasped each other in a deadly embrace.

What a struggle for life ensued there over the awful depths of the Black Gorge!

The slender log swayed and creaked beneath their struggling forms, threatening to snap in twain and hurl both combatants down into the blackness, fifty feet below.

To and fro they swayed—striking, struggling and writhing like serpents. Still they kept their legs clasped about the log like bands of steel, but at last they lost their equilibrium and turned completely over the log! Their situation was now indeed perilous. With their feet locking over the top of the log and their bodies dangling below, they struggled and fought on more desperately than before.

Under any other circumstances it would have required a superhuman strength and courage to have maintained even for a brief time the awful

position, without contending with a foe; but desperation lent them strength.

The savage succeeded in entwining his muscular arms around the form of our hero, and then made a desperate effort to crush the life from the young body. But the youth had managed to seize the warrior by the scalp-lock, and was thereby enabled to thrust his head backward until the crown touched between the shoulders.

Half-strangled, the red-skin loosened his hold upon the youth's body, and becoming dizzy and faint, with a determined effort to drag the youth down into the abyss with him, he clutched the lad with both hands by the throat, as his feet slipped apart; but unable to maintain the hold upon the throat, with a wild, despairing shriek, that echoed in prolonged wails through the gorge, the doomed wretch went whizzing down into the fearful abyss.

The young ranger had won the victory; he was free, but still hanging head downward over the black gulf. And now he realized his true peril, for he was far from being saved; his limbs were growing weak, and his head dizzy with the rush of blood to the brain. He attempted to draw himself up and to grasp the log with his hands, but the attempt proved a failure.

Then he feels a vibratory shock of the log. Great heavens! It is produced by a footstep, and, no doubt, that of another Indian! He sees a dark form upon the log outlined against the sky. He fixed his glaring eyes upon it!

Blessed sight! It was the form of Old Optic! "Hold on to it, boyee, I'll he'p," cried the old trapper.

The next instant, brave Harry was assisted from his awful position—saved!

"That war a ticklish place, Hawkeye," said the old trapper, as he assisted the youth along the log to the cliff.

"Yes," responded the young ranger, "and but for your timely arrival, I should have gone down after the savage. How is it that you are here, Optic?"

"That very Injun war nosin' around the Cone arter ye left, and I took a notion to his skulp, and trailed him here just in time to see him start fur the diggin's below."

Despite his late excitement, Hawkeye Harry's mind reverted to the unknown avenger, whose voice so closely resembled that of Old Optic. He would have questioned the old trapper further, but the appearance of half a dozen shadowy figures on the opposite side of the gorge suggested the idea of a hasty retreat to the Cone; and not until they were safe within its walls, and the door barred, did they engage in further conversation.

Hawkeye Harry now gave a brief account of his night's adventures, in the meantime watching closely the expression of the old trapper's face; yet the youth said nothing of the similarity in his friend's voice to that of the Unknown.

"By snakes!" exclaimed the old trapper, when the youth had finished his story; "that's curious. We'll have to investigate the matter some o' these days."

"To-morrow," returned the young ranger, "I shall make a scout far beyond the big prairies to see how far these Indian devils are going. You know I promised the settlers over on the Raccoon that I would watch the Indians, and warn them if they were likely to be troubled."

"Yas, Hawkeye," added the old trapper, "we've got to look sharp. The varmints are thick and mean deviltry. If you take to the prairie, I'll look thro' the timber north o' us."

"Very well. I shall be off by sunrise. I will take my horse, so that, in case I find the reds are going toward the Raccoon settlement, I'll try and beat them there."

"That's you, lad, that's you!" responded Old Optic; "and now, if we mean to work to-morrow, we'd better turn into bunk, fur the night's well spent."

After some preparation for the morrow, the two sought their couches and were soon asleep, trusting their safety to a faithful old hound that slept near the door on the outside of the Cone, and whose instinct was never at fault.

With the first streaks of the dawn the two were astir, and when their rude breakfast was cooked and eaten, their weapons cleaned and polished, Hawkeye Harry went outside of the Cone, and, placing a small bone whistle to his lips, he blew two or three shrill notes upon it.

In response to the call, a spirited brown horse—a cross of the mustang and new American stock—came galloping down the valley from among the shrubbery, where it had been grazing, and approached its young master.

"Now for a long, hard ride, my noble beast,"

said the youth, vaulting onto its back, without saddle or bridle.

"Take care of yourself, old friend," Harry called to Old Optic; then, speaking to his horse, he was off like an arrow, dashing down the valley.

But, scarcely was he out of sight of the Cone, when the figure of an Indian, whose gaudy head-gear and flashing ornaments bespoke distinction, emerged from the shadows of a clump of elders hard by and approached the hut.

At the door he was met by Old Optic, who received him with kindness and manifest pleasure, and ushered him into the Cone.

CHAPTER IV.

THE PRAIRIE TRADERS.

THERE is a sublime grandeur in the great prairies of the North-west that inspires one with a feeling akin to that produced by gazing upon the billowy ocean. Yet there is a material difference in the impression left upon the mind by sight of the ocean and prairie. The sailor will become so accustomed to the one that after awhile it fails to awaken more than a passing interest within his breast; but familiarity never lessens the majestic grandeur of the prairie to the rover of the plain. This may all be from the constant changes that the eternal rounds of the seasons bring upon the silent, voiceless waves of the prairie ocean, and relieves it of that monotonous sameness which is forever on the face of the watery deep. Yet, at no season is there more romantic beauty, tranquil repose and inspiring grandeur than in autumn, when Indian summer has thrown her misty veil over the landscape—when the air is delicious with balmy fragrance, and the plain seems to melt away in the distance like the visions of a dream.

The day was near its close—one of those balmy October days.

A youthful horseman galloping westward over one of those prairie wastes, suddenly drew rein upon the crest of a gentle swell, and swept the plain around him with a gaze as quick and interrogative as that of a hawk. His face then lit up with a glow of admiration as he feasted his dark-gray eyes upon the great expanse that rolled away in its gorgeous coating of brown and emerald.

Hawkeye Harry had seen that plain before, but never had it appeared so grand as upon this autumnal evening.

The crest of each wave or undulation seemed gilded with burnished gold as the red beams of the setting sun streamed across it; while shadows of somber gray were gathering in the valleys and lengthening over the plain.

The great expanse was bounded upon three sides by the blue horizon, and upon the fourth by the dark belt of timber bordering upon the Boyer lake and river. It was diversified by small streams, that wound like silver threads across its bosom, and here and there it was dotted with small mottes of timber—*islands* in that mighty sea of verdure.

Toward one of these mottes Hawkeye Harry turned his animal's head, and rode at a loping gallop.

Though no living object was visible, he knew he was in an Indian country, consequently he did not permit his vigilance to relax. As he approached the little clump of trees, he checked the speed of his horse to inspect the surroundings of the grove before venturing into it.

The shrill neigh of a horse coming from the depths of the grove startled him, and he drew rein and listened.

He could hear nothing more, but, above the tree-tops from the center of the motte, he saw a thin column of smoke slowly drifting heavenward.

Some one was in the grove, and a person unaccustomed to the signs and dangers of the prairie would have hesitated about advancing. But not so with Hawkeye Harry. He knew at once there were no Indians in the grove, but some one who was ignorant of the publicity he, or they, perhaps, were making of their location. All this he read in that column of bluesmoke, and riding forward he soon entered the grove.

He was not a little surprised to see six white men, seated around a camp-fire, smoking and chatting with as little concern as though they were a thousand miles from an Indian! In the background stood a covered wagon. Its white tilt was drawn down in front and behind, and was securely fastened, thus making it impossible for our hero to see what it contained.

Near the vehicle a number of horses were hitched, and the marks upon them showed that they had just been released from the harness and saddle.

"Hullo!" exclaimed one of the men, as our hero drew rein before them, "who have we here?"

"A prairie freebooter," replied Hawkeye Harry, with a merry sparkle of the eyes.

"Well, my young freebooter, you surely have some name inflicted upon you?" said the stranger.

"You can call me Harry—"

"Hawkeye Harry?" interrupted the man.

"If you like," responded the young ranger.

"*Sacre!* Comrades, we're in luck," exclaimed the man, turning to his friends; "this is the very scout that we've come over a day's journey out of the way to find."

"Good!" ejaculated his companions.

"And I reckon it would be all right if I'd ask your name, wouldn't it?" inquired our hero.

"Certainly," replied the man; "my name is Henri Roche."

"That sounds a little Frenchy," said Harry, with a smile.

"You are good at judging one's nationality by his name," returned Roche.

"I'm sure you speak the white man's language pat enough."

The strangers laughed at this remark.

"I am a Frenchman only by birth," Roche finally returned. "I was raised in America among Americans, and know nothing of the French tongue; but will you not dismount? I would like to speak with you about the country, for I have learned that you can give the information we desire in regard to it."

Henri Roche was a tall, powerful-built man, with a complexion as swarthy as a Mexican's. His eyes were black, sharp and brilliant. His hair was long—sweeping his shoulders—and, like the heavy mustache that shaded a somewhat coarse or sensual mouth, was black as the raven's wing. He was dressed in a suit of gray cloth, high-topped boots, and a low-crowned, wide-brimmed hat. A handsome belt, bristling with knives and pistols, girded his waist, and altogether, in his complexion, his features and dress, there was about him the air and general appearance of a Spanish Creole of the South.

His companions were dressed in a half-civilized, half-savage garb, and from appearances the young ranger would have pronounced them bordermen. But, from their presence there under the circumstances, the tilted wagon, and the look of anxious suspense upon their bearded faces, and the strange light in their flashing eyes, Hawkeye Harry was inclined to doubt the honesty of their sojourning unmolested through the country.

He was too cautious and prudent to let any look or word betray his inward emotions of mistrust, but prompted by curiosity, he accepted Roche's invitation to dismount, and resolved to remain with them during the night.

By this time the sun had sunk behind the western horizon, and having staked his animal at grass at the outskirts of the motte, Hawkeye Harry took a seat with the emigrants before the fire.

"I suppose, strangers," said Harry, "that you know you're in a dangerous country?"

"We know we are in the Indian country, but hope there are no Indians in the immediate vicinity," returned Roche. "Probably you can enlighten us in that respect."

"Well, the fact of it is," said Harry, "the red-skins are all around us. At this minute they may be miles from here, and by midnight be right onto us, cutting and slashing."

"And is there no other danger in this country, save that to be expected from the Indians?" asked Roche.

"Yes, there's them cursed white robbers under old Rat Rouge, that's worse on such things," pointing to the covered wagon, "than the red-skins. You see, old Rat and Co. are after plunder, not scalps, like the greasy red-skins."

The men exchanged significant glances, and Hawkeye Harry was sure he detected a smile upon the bearded face of one of them.

"Well, I hope we will escape the minions of Rouge," said Henri, "for we have a very valuable load of merchandise, with which we want to cross beyond the Missouri river."

"Whew!" ejaculated Harry; "then you're prairie traders, are you?"

"Well—yes," returned Roche. "I suppose you would call us traders, although we have done no trading yet. Our load consists of cheap fabrics, knives, whisky and beads. With these articles we want to reach the Pawnee country beyond the Missouri, and exchange them for furs, which we will boat down the river to St. Louis."

"Exactly," returned Harry; "but couldn't

you do just as well, and save time, by doing your trading with the Indians round and about these diggings? Fur and peltry picking have been pretty rich this fall."

"We might do equally as well, if the Indians were at peace. However, we have started for the Pawnee country, and will endeavor to make it; and we want to employ you to guide us through this territory."

"Ah, the deuce you say!" exclaimed Harry.

"Yes," replied Roche; "two days ago we lost our guide. He deserted us. At the first settlement we came to we tried to employ another, but failed. The settlers told us of Hawkeye Harry, and directed us by a course in which we might accidentally meet him. Fortune has favored us thus far, and now I hope you will consent to accompany us."

"To be plain with you," returned Harry, "I can't go."

"And why not, I pray?"

"I've a mission to perform, which I can't delay under any circumstances—it's imperative."

The traders seemed greatly disappointed, but, from some reason or other, Harry could not believe it was real. There was an undercurrent in Henri Roche's conversation, as also in his very looks, that, boy that he was, Harry had a great curiosity to fathom.

"Well, well," said Roche, "this is quite a disappointment."

"I'm sorry," returned Harry, "but I can give you such directions as'll take you safe to the Missouri."

"That will do," exclaimed Henri Roche, drawing from an inner pocket a small memorandum and pencil; "here, can you give us an outline-map of the country and its rivers, lakes, and other geographical points between here and the Missouri river?"

"I reckon that I know all about the country, but I don't know about a map. I'm not very handy with a pencil—good with a rifle and scalping-knife, however; I'll try it."

Roche handed him the book and pencil.

In a few minutes he had sketched a crude, but plainly correct map of the country to the westward of them, and passed it to Roche.

The traders examined it; then Roche, their leader, asked, pointing to the map:

"What stream is this?"

"That's the Boyer river—not a very large stream; you can ford it anywhere within thirty miles of the Boyer lake. Indians are pretty thick for some ten miles south of the lake, and hunting-parties are to be found most anywhere along the river. You'll have to look sharp from this on. In this direction"—noting the course on the map—"there's a heavy belt of timber which extends to the 'Coon river. You want to keep out of that, for old Rat Rouge has his ranch in there somewhere."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Roche, and he exchanged glances with his companions.

For a moment there was silence, during which Hawkeye Harry was sure he heard a deep sigh, which was almost a sob. It came from none of the party.

The eyes of the traders were fixed upon Harry with an interrogative expression.

Feigning ignorance of what he had heard, the youth continued:

"Yes, old Rat and gang are in that timber, but you can keep ten miles south of that on the open prairie, and may have no trouble. However, as it's about dark now, you'd better put this fire out, or its light might draw the prowling red-skins onto us, when the consequence would be a draw on our hair. To-morrow morning I'll give you further directions."

In compliance with the suggestion, the fire was extinguished.

Then the traders went to see that their horses were secure for the night. Harry did likewise, and on his way back to camp, he stopped under a wild plum-bush that was laden with ripened fruit. Plucking a handful of the luscious, yellow plums, and producing a slice of dried venison, he made a sumptuous meal thereon. Then he rejoined the traders at the camp.

"What think you, Hawkeye—had we better post guards over the camp to-night?" asked Roche.

"By all means," replied Harry; "the red-skins may strike your wagon-trail and follow you up. As there's most danger after midnight, I'll agree to keep watch then."

The traders readily acquiesced in this and two of their number went on guard. The other four, and Hawkeye Harry, seated themselves near the wagon, and conversed for some time on various topics.

Presently they grew sleepy, and, wrapping their blankets around them, each one sought

the most comfortable spot for a bed that the hard earth would afford.

Hawkeye Harry laid down under the wagon, with his head in the hollow of a saddle. Roche was the nearest one of the traders to him, and he was over a rod away.

Our hero did not go to sleep—in fact, it was not his intention to let slumber close his eyes, until he had made sure of the contents of the covered wagon!

He noticed that Roche lay with his face directly toward him, and for a while he feared that the trader half-suspected his intentions.

Had he taken a second thought, the youth would have selected a different spot for a couch, so there would have been no grounds by which to suspect his purpose. But if he was suspected at all, it was too late now to make amends. However, his mind was soon set at ease. As the minutes passed by, the heavy and regular respiration of the travel-worn traders told him that they slept, and that their sleep was sound. Then Harry crept to the rear of the wagon and arose to his feet.

The moon was in the zenith, and it so happened that its rays fell full upon the wagon. This enabled him to see that the thick canvas cover was so securely tacked to the wagon-box that there was no possible chance of seeing in. The flap in front was drawn down and fastened in a manner similar to the sides.

Hawkeye Harry was not to be defeated in this manner; so, drawing his knife, he inserted its point under the head of a tack with the intention of prying it out so that he would be enabled to lift the cover. But the instant he touched the knife to the wagon-box he became motionless, for a vibratory shock was communicated to his arm from the knife. The latter had received the shock from the box; but what had produced it?

Hawkeye Harry pressed his ear close against the cover and listened.

He started. It was all he could do to restrain an exclamation of surprise.

There was life within that wagon! He could hear the low, quick breathing of either a human or a beast.

Becoming impatient and uneasy, he cut a slit in the canvas cover, and applied his ear to it.

There was no mistaking the evidence of his hearing now. A living creature was within that wagon, and having, from experience, learned to discriminate between the breathing of a human and a beast, he knew it was a *human being within the wagon!*

The respirations were short and quick, broken now and then with a sigh—a *woman's sigh!*

There was no doubt of this.

CHAPTER V.

WHAT HARRY STOLE FROM THE TRADERS.

Hawkeye Harry became thoughtful. There was not a doubt in his mind now but that the pretended traders were villains. But, how should he act? He was satisfied in his own mind that the woman—if it really was a woman—in the wagon, was a prisoner; and under the circumstances, his spirit and humane heart rebelled against the idea of leaving the camp without learning the true situation of the person in the covered vehicle.

If it was a woman, or even a child, how could he liberate her, or it, without creating some noise in getting away from the camp? Even if he succeeded in getting the prisoner from the wagon, could he escape detection by the two guards in getting away from the grove?

He had scarcely asked himself the question when something touched him gently upon the shoulder next to the wagon. He turned his head, and almost staggered under the visionary blow which he received. Through the rent he had made in the canvas cover, he saw a small snow-white hand protruding. He knew at a glance by the tapering, dimpled fingers, the round and marble smoothness of the arm, that it was the hand and arm of a young female.

In the very position of that little hand Hawkeye Harry intuitively read a silent and humble appeal for assistance; of this, words could not have told him plainer.

He reached forward and gently took the little hand within his own hard palm. It was soft as velvet, and the touch sent a magnetic thrill through his whole frame. It was to let the owner of that hand know that he was cognizant of her presence in the wagon, that induced him to grasp the delicate member.

Gently the hand of the unknown drew him closer to the wagon. He knew by this that she wished to speak to him, and when the little hand was withdrawn he applied his ear to the rent.

"Oh, sir! I am a prisoner! Can you not save me from the power of these wicked men?" was breathed gently, softly in his ear.

Harry's spirit was aroused. There was something in the humble appeal of the unknown prisoner that seemed to have magnified his strength and courage to that of desperation.

Placing his lips to the rent, he replied:

"Keep silent as the grave, and I'll save you before morning, be you man, woman or child."

"I am a helpless girl; these men are taking me I know not where!" replied the prisoner.

"A helpless girl!" mused Harry. "By heaven, I'll bet she's an angel, and she shall be saved, if it costs Hawkeye Harry his life!"

Again placing his mouth to the rent, he said:

"Wait till after midnight; then I'll come to your rescue. Can you ride on horseback?"

"Yes," replied the prisoner.

Harry withdrew from the side of the wagon, and returned to his couch, but not to sleep. The touch of that little hand was still vibrating through every nerve; he could still hear that gentle voice breathing in his ear, and in his mind he had pictured the face of an angel. Finally, he fell to speculating over her situation—why it was that she was a prisoner there, who her captors were, from whence she had been abducted, and to where she was being taken. But he could arrive at nothing definite in regard to the matter, more than that there was a little mystery and considerable villainy in it.

The four traders slept soundly, and after a couple of hours more had worn away in anxiety and suspense to the young ranger, he knew it must be near midnight. The moon was sinking to the westward, and its light no longer shone upon the covered wagon.

Again Harry arose from his couch upon the hard earth, and going to where the two traders were on guard, he relieved them from duty, and took upon his own shoulders the entire responsibility of the watch.

The men returned to camp, and were soon stretched upon the ground, fast asleep.

Hawkeye Harry remained at his post over an hour; then, with all his remarkable caution, he crept back to the camp and found that all the traders were sleeping soundly. He next went to where their horses were hitched; and having selected the fleetest and strongest one in the corral, he untied it and led it around to where his own horse was tied at grass. He then procured a saddle and bridle, and put the former on the back of the trader's horse. The bridle he put on his own animal, then strapped a blanket over its back. All was now ready for the flight with the maiden.

Cautiously he crept back to the wagon, and having made sure that the traders were asleep, he tapped softly on the canvas cover.

There was a response in a similar manner.

Harry's heart now began to flutter excitedly, not so much through fear of being detected in what he was doing, as expectation, and the consciousness that he would stand face to face, the next minute, with a strange maiden that in his mind's eye he had pictured as an angel.

With his knife he slit the canvas, and then, thrusting his head through the rent, whispered:

"Are you ready to flee, little stranger?"

"Yes, sir," was the response.

"Then come, and be just as easy as you can."

Harry withdrew his head from the opening,

and the next instant he saw the head and shoulders of the unknown appear from the wagon. It was not so dark but that he could see the outlines of her features, and at the first glance he saw that his mind's picture was not overdrawn—that the face of the maiden was one of exquisite loveliness. She was young, not over fifteen years of age, with a small, lithe figure, clear-cut features, and long, wavy hair that fell in golden ripples down her back.

Cautiously Hawkeye Harry assisted the trembling girl from the wagon and placed her upon her feet; but her limbs were so cramped with long confinement that she was compelled to cling to Harry for support.

Here was the first trouble, which had been wholly unexpected; but Harry, since he had gained but even a partial view of the maiden's face, had been inspired with a new life, and he resolved that nothing, unless it was death, should deter him from rescuing the maiden. So he lifted her in his arms as though she had been a child, and carried her to where the two horses were in readiness.

Then he placed her upon the back of his own trusty animal, gave her the reins, and unhitched the beast.

Turning, he mounted the trader's horse, and the next moment they were galloping eastward over the plain.

Harry saw at a glance that his young *protege* was no novice in equestrianism. She sat her horse with grace and ease.

Upon the open plain, the moon rendered it almost as light as day. The night was unusually warm for October, in this high latitude, and the air was laden with a soft and balmy fragrance, dreamlike in its inspiration.

When they had cleared the outskirts of the motte, and found themselves fairly upon the plain, Hawkeye Harry turned his eyes, with a strange light of admiration beaming from their depths, upon the fair being at his side.

Her golden hair was pushed back by the breeze from a snowy brow, and floated about her head in beautiful, disordered tresses. Her features were purely classical in outline, and as clearly cut as those of an ancient cameo; her eyes, as near as he could tell by the moonlight, were of a dark brown, large and lustrous, and shaded by long, drooping lashes, that gave them an innocent and childlike expression.

Her dress was of some rich material, and was made after a fashion that was not of the border. A crimson shawl was about her shoulders and fastened in front by a jeweled clasp. A circlet of gold flashed upon one of her dimpled fingers, while about her neck was a necklace of great brilliancy, to which was attached a locket that gleamed like a diamond as it nestled against her snowy throat.

She was a being of rare beauty, and it required but a single glance to tell our hero that she was a child of luxury and wealth; her rich dress and flashing jewels told of affluence untainted by vanity, and her tone and general appearance were indicative of social refinement and intellectual culture.

How came she in the power of Henri Roche and his party?

Harry, now that he had accomplished the maiden's rescue, found himself at a loss for words to open a conversation; he felt that he was in the presence of a being far superior to him; that his rude backwoods speech and coarse buck-skin garments would shock her refined sensibilities. The maiden seemed to have divined his thoughts, and at once bore down the barrier of formality by saying:

"Kind sir, this is more than I had expected from a stranger."

"What is?" stammered Harry.

"That you should endanger your life for my sake."

"My life, little woman, has become accustomed to constant dangers. I'm a free trapper of the Nor'-west, without kith or kin, and with no one to mourn for me if I am lost. I like the adventure I have up here among these northern lakes, among the red-skins and beaver."

"And did I not hear you tell my abductors your name was Hawkeye Harry?" asked the maiden.

"That's what I'm called, though my right name is Harry Houston," replied the young man.

"I heard Hawkeye Harry highly spoken of at the fort," said his fair companion.

"At the fort?" exclaimed Harry. "Then you live at the fort, do you?"

"No, sir," she replied; "I have a brother there whom I was visiting along with my father. My home is in Ohio. You know my brother, perhaps; his name is Eugene Gardette."

"Major Gardette?"

"The same."

"I know the major like a beaver-trap; and you're his sister?"

"Yes, sir. My name is Nora Gardette."

"Then I'll warrant the major, with a party of soldiers, isn't far behind Henri Roche and his men; but how came you in Roche's power, Miss Gardette?"

"At sunset, the day before yesterday, I walked out alone along the river-bank, a short distance above the fort. I would not have gone at all, but brother Eugene promised to join me in a few minutes. I sat down on a log by the river-bank to wait for him. Just then two men came from the woods behind me. One of them seized me and placed a handkerchief over my mouth to prevent me from crying out. Then he said to his companion:

"Take her hat, Price, and toss it into the river, and crumble off the edge of the bank, so they'll think she's fallen into the water and been drowned."

"The next instant I was lifted in my abductor's arms and carried back into the woods, where fleet horses were in waiting. I was taken upon horseback, still in my abductor's arms, and all night long I was borne away at a

rapid speed. At daylight this morning we came upon three men with a tilted wagon. They were friends of my abductors. I was placed in the wagon and all day the horses have been pushed forward over the prairie under whip and rowl. I know none of my captors, nor why they are carrying me away, nor where to. I know they are bad men, for I heard them tell you many falsehoods to-night. And before you rode up to camp, they saw you approaching, and Roche warned me that it would be your death-warrant if I made my presence known to you while you were about."

"The infernal scamp!" exclaimed Harry, indignantly.

"So you see, Mr. Houston—"

"Miss Gardette, call me Hawkeye or Harry, if you please. Mister Houston will do when I am in the settlements or city."

The maiden could not repress a smile at the youth's somewhat rude request, and then, having made compliance, she continued:

"So you see, Hawkeye, there is but little hope of my father and brother coming to my rescue, if my abductors' plans have not failed in leading them to believe I was drowned."

Harry made no reply. Far away upon the plain, to their left, he had caught sight of a black, moving mass of something which caused him no little uneasiness. But the object soon flitted from view, like the shadow of a cloud passing over the sun's disk. Still, its disappearance did not relieve the young rescuer of his fears. It might have been a body of mounted Indians that had sunk behind the crest of a prairie wave.

It would have been immaterial to Harry whether it were Indians or not, had he been alone, but now that he was not—that a helpless maiden was trusting to him for safety and protection, he knew it would require every precaution and extra exertion to maintain that trust.

Dismounting, the youth threw himself upon the grass and applied his ear to the earth. He started up. Distinctly he detected the dull thumping of hoofs upon the plain.

The maiden wondered at his movements, and at last a suspicion arose in her mind—a suspicion that her young rescuer had detected some approaching danger.

"Are we in danger, Hawkeye?" she asked.

The youth was surprised at her query. He had hoped to keep the truth of their situation concealed from her, but, seeing that she was possessed of more than ordinary courage and decision of mind, he said, as he remounted his animal:

"I'm afraid danger is at hand. A party of horsemen are riding almost directly toward us, and I fear they're Indians. Let us gallop on a little brisker, Miss Gardette."

They urged their animals onward at a pace which soon carried them into a little valley. The moon was nearly down, and the shadows of the ridge to the westward of them wrapped the valley in its mantle of darkness, and afforded the fugitives a temporary shelter.

They drew rein and listened. Plainly they could hear the half-muffled tread of innumerable hoofs upon the grass-covered plain.

"It is Indians," said Harry, in a low tone.

"What makes you think so, Hawkeye?" asked the maiden; "we can not see them."

"If it were white men, the ring and jingle of their trappings would make more noise than their animals' hoofs—Ah! look! there they go!"

True enough, from behind the swell in the plain, three score of horsemen burst suddenly upon their view. As they galloped along the ridge, not over a hundred yards from our young friends, they were plainly outlined against the darkness. They were Indians; this was a fact readily perceived in the plumed heads and flashing spears, but, in the moonlight, they seemed magnified into beings of colossal stature, and but for the sound made by their animals' hoofs, they would have seemed like so many grim phantoms.

Hawkeye Harry knew at a glance they were on the war-path, and were either heading for the southern settlements, or the country of their red enemies, the Potawatomes; but, in either case, the fears he entertained for the settlers or friendly Indians were nothing compared with his apprehension of being detected in the shadows of the little valley. He scarcely breathed, for fear the acute ears of the warriors would hear him. He knew the least sound would be borne to them.

He felt certain that their forms were so blended with the shadows of the valley as to defy being seen. One thing, however, made him uneasy. The Indians would cross their

trail at right angles, and might discover it. If not, there was a possibility of the Indians passing on without a knowledge of their proximity to the young pale-faces.

It was a moment of fearful suspense and anxiety to the ranger. His fair companion also was in a state of great uncertainty, but she did not comprehend the magnitude of their danger.

Slowly their eyes followed the phantom-like figures along the ridge. The trail is reached and crossed without discovery.

Hawkeye Harry began to breathe more freely, but, at the last moment, when the danger of discovery seemed past, his horse reared his head and uttered a shrill neigh.

The sound was borne to the keen ears of the warriors, who drew rein so quickly that they seemed to recoil like a wave when it strikes upon the shore. There was no mistaking the direction from whence the sound came, and the next instant the savages were thundering down into the little valley with a yell that was horrifying.

"We're discovered, Miss Gardette," said the youth, in a firm and natural tone; "and now we will have to ride—ride for our lives! Do not despair; we may elude the savages in the woods to the north, if we are not taken before we reach them. Away!"

A low cry of terror pealed from the maiden's lips. Just as they were on the eve of galloping away, a dark form arose from the tall grass, almost under her animal's feet, and sprang upon the beast's back behind her. She felt her form encircled by what she supposed to be a pair of arms, but in her vain endeavor to break their grasp, she realized, with a feeling akin to terror, that they were hairy, like the arms of a beast.

Hawkeye Harry saw the fearful form leap to the animal's back behind the maiden. He drew a pistol, but, before he could fire, the animal, with its double burden, shot away, like an arrow, over the plain! He followed on in swift pursuit, but he soon found the horse he bestrode was no match for his own clean-limbed animal—that upon which the maiden and her fearful companion were fleeing. But, never despairing, he lashed the animal to its utmost speed and pressed on in pursuit, while close behind him came the savages, the earth fairly trembling with their demoniac yells and the thunderous tread of their animals' hoofs.

It was an exciting moment—a wild, fearful midnight chase!

CHAPTER VI.

A TERRIBLE MISTAKE.

THE mustang pony of the Western Indian is more remarkable for endurance than speed. This fact Hawkeye Harry was aware of, and had he been upon his trusty animal, he would have entertained no fears of being overtaken by the pursuing savages.

As it was, however, he soon found that the horse he bestrode was not a fast runner, and was already jaded by the day's travel. Captivity stared the lad in the face, and in case he was taken, who would rescue the little dark-eyed maiden—Nora Gardette, sweet, pretty Nora—with whose fate his own life seemed so strangely intermingled? All his thoughts went out to her. He thought only of escaping from the Indians for her sake.

Never had he been so strangely impressed before. His interest in strangers had only been passive; now it was active. Boy that he was—a free rover of the prairie—a stranger to the gentler passions of the human heart—he knew not from whence sprung his interest in Nora Gardette—he knew not that his heart was no longer free—that it was enchained by the power of a first love.

Would he ever see her again? The thought that he would strengthened his determination, and he urged his panting beast forward at the top of its speed. But he saw that his efforts to escape the savages were unavailing. The foe were gaining upon him at every bound. If he would escape it must be effected by stratagem, and he at once decided upon that resort, though, if it succeeded at all, it would be at a fearful risk.

Turning his animal's head slightly to the right, he pressed it rapidly up a gentle slope whose crest brought him out, to the eyes of his pursuers, in bold relief against the sky.

It was the youth's intention to follow this ridge a short distance in full view of the enemy, but, seeing it dipped quickly down into a dark valley, he changed his course and kept straight on over the hill, whose summit soon shut him from view of the enemy. But, as this would be for only a moment, now was the time for him to

act. He was riding directly north, and checking his animal suddenly, he dismounted, and then, turning the horse's head directly west, fired a pistol close to its head, and sent it flying away with affright.

The next instant the youth threw himself flat upon the earth in the tall prairie grass.

Just then the Indians gained the summit of the ridge. Their keen eyes saw the fugitive's horse flying westward, at right angles with their previous course, and never dreaming but that the youth was upon the beast, they quickly changed their course and cut straight across the angle. This would give them several rods the advantage, but, by so doing, the crouching form of Harry was saved from being trodden to death, which would have been the case had they followed in the footsteps of the fugitive's horse. As it was, he was left several rods to the right. His stratagem had proved a success—he had cunningly outwitted the foe, and, as he heard their yells and saw their forms fading away into the distance and darkness, he arose to his feet, and, with a smile of triumph upon his young face, hurried away northward over the plain.

He knew that the fugitive horse could run much faster, now that it was free of a burden and the curbing hand of a rider, and he hoped to gain the timber a short distance north of him, before the savages came up with the horse, and found it bore no rider.

His thoughts, undisturbed by the late danger and excitement, now turned wholly upon Nora Gardette. He shuddered when he recalled to mind the terrible form that leaped on the horse behind her. Yet, he could but think that the form was that of an Indian, or renegade white, clad in the skin of a wild beast.

He had but little difficulty, despite the darkness, in finding the trail of the horse on which the daring captor had fled with the maiden. The grass was trodden down and the hoof-prints deep in the yielding soil, so he was enabled to follow it quite briskly.

He soon came to the timber, where he met with a bitter disappointment. He found that the shadows of the forest rendered it so intensely dark as to make it totally impossible to follow the trail. His only course was to await the coming of day.

This was unfortunate, and would not only serve to increase the distance between him and Nora, but give his enemies behind, on the prairie, a chance to come up with him and endanger his situation. But, then, it was his only course, and he was forced to submit to whatever dangers or disadvantages it would bring upon him.

Selecting a place of security, the youth seated himself to wait, but not to sleep. He was too well posted in the dangers of the woods to let slumber close his eyes at such an hour.

To any one in Harry's situation, the minutes seem prolonged into hours, and impatience becomes agonizing. But the Boy Ranger breasted it through. After weary hours, day dawned, and with the first glimmer of light he took up the trail.

He was an experienced trailer, and, although the trail was not so plain through the woods as it had been upon the prairie, he experienced no difficulty in following it.

He had journeyed nearly an hour, when he found that the hoof-prints that he was following suddenly grew deeper from some cause, and the leaves were torn up, as though the horse had become unmanageable from affright. In looking further he saw where it had shied suddenly to one side.

What had been the cause of this sudden movement?

The question had scarcely formed in the ranger's mind when his eyes fell upon an object that caused him to start back with a shudder.

It was the body of an Indian, lying upon his back, dead. His head had been scalped, and presented a repulsive sight, all covered with coagulated blood, as was, also, his ghastly face. His shoulders and breast were entirely naked, yet, strange enough, presented no wounds nor injuries. His legs and part of his body were covered with leaves and twigs, and from all appearances he had been slain recently. But who had done the deed?

He was not a Sioux warrior; that, Harry saw at once; but one of the Sacs, a less powerful tribe, which, at this time, was at war with, not only the white man, but all the neighboring tribes.

If he had been slain by a white enemy, then Harry had nothing to fear; but if by a Sioux, it was evidence at once that he had enemies be-

fore him to contend with, and who were, in all probability, on the same trail that he was following.

Not wishing, however, to lose time in making further investigations as to the enemy that slew the Sac warrior, the Boy Ranger moved on.

He had gone but a few steps apast the body, when some unknown power caused him to glance back over his shoulder.

He started with a shudder as he did so.

To his horror he saw the supposed dead Indian rise quickly to his feet, and from under the leaves draw a tomahawk, which he raised aloft and hurled at his head—all within a second's time.

Had the youth made the discovery a second later, the tomahawk would have been buried in his brain; but, in turning his head, it was thrown slightly to one side just as the weapon whizzed by.

The cunning red-skin had not calculated upon making any failure in braining the youth, but the instant he saw he *had* failed, he turned and took to his heels. But the youth quickly brought his rifle to face, and glancing along the barrel, fired.

The quick up-throwing of the arms, and the yell of agony that followed, told that Hawkeye Harry's aim had been fatal.

Making up to the body of the fallen foe, he saw that his bullet had pierced the head just above the ear; and in noting this, he also noticed that the savage had actually survived the torture of a scalping-knife! But it had not been done lately. The wound was healed over, and the blood upon the bald crown had been put there to deceive our hero, no doubt, for it made it appear as though the scalp had recently been removed. The trick worked well, and almost fatally to Hawkeye Harry. But the whole affair convinced him that the savage had been expecting him along the trail of Nora's captor; and if such was the case, then the savage was a companion to the maiden's abductor, and both were prowling Sac warriors. And it might be that a large party of them were not far away; so he considered it prudent to get away from that spot as soon as possible, for the report of his rifle might attract danger. He again took up the trail and pressed on, though exercising extreme caution.

The trail, he found, had changed in course until it now bore directly toward the Boyer river, and as he continued on, he suddenly heard the faint neigh of a horse in his advance. He felt satisfied that it was that of his own horse, and that he was nearing the object of his pursuit.

A few minutes' walk brought him in sight of the river, and just before him, on the bank, he saw his own animal standing hitched.

He could see no one about it, yet he knew, from the horse's action, that all was not right.

Keeping around to the left, Harry reached the river bank, several rods below the horse. Here he paused to make further investigations. He scanned the undergrowth to the right and beyond the bank, but he saw nothing of Nora nor her captor. He then ran his eyes along the edge of the river, and as he did so, he could scarcely repress a cry of joy; for, through a small opening in the shrubbery that lined the shore, he caught the flutter of something red. He was satisfied it was the crimson shawl worn by Nora Gardette.

Creeping to a more commanding point, he found that he was correct.

Seated in a small bark canoe, and apparently waiting for something or some one, he saw Nora and her captor. There was no mistaking Nora's beautiful crimson shawl. She sat with her back toward Harry, with her form enveloped in the ample folds of her shawl, which was also drawn, hood-like, over her head, as a protection, probably, against the heavy mist that hung along the river. The savage's head, face and form were enveloped in a similar manner, in a black, hairy robe, made of a bear's skin. Neither his face nor hands could be seen, yet the young trapper was satisfied that he was an Indian, and that he was waiting the return of the one he had slain in the forest, and who was, in all probability, to take the horse, while the other proceeded with the maiden, by water, to the village of the tribe, many leagues down the river.

"But, I'll spoil their fun," mused our hero, seeing what an easy matter it would be to rescue Nora. "I think a bullet-hole through that bear-skin and the tufted head under it will quiet the nerves of that cunning cuss."

As he concluded, he raised his trusty rifle, and, bringing it to bear upon the bear-skin

about where he supposed the Indian's head to be, he glanced along the polished barrel and pressed the trigger.

Clear upon the morning air the report of the piece rung out, followed by a scream of agony—the piercing scream of a woman!

Without waiting to see what had been the effect of his shot, he rushed from his covert and approached the point where the canoe lay. As he did so, what was his horror on beholding the maiden's crimson shawl thrown aside from the head and shoulders of an Indian warrior, who leaped ashore and fled away into the woods. And there, in the bottom of the canoe, upon the bear-skin, which had fallen from her head and shoulders, lay the lifeless form of Nora Gardette, with the crimson tide of life welling from a bullet-hole in the forehead!

"My God, what a fatal mistake!" burst in agony from the trapper boy's lips. "I have slain her! Oh, Nora! Nora! Speak to me—tell me it is *not* so!"

But Nora's voice was hushed.

The half-distracted youth sprung into the canoe, and lifting her form in his arms, pillowed her head upon his aching breast.

Then he grew sick at heart, the cold sweat started from every pore, for he knew that he held in his arms a lifeless form!

CHAPTER VII.

HENRI ROCHE IN A RAGE.

HENRI ROCHE and party slept on.

They had gone to sleep with a double assurance that no danger would be visited upon them; and believing that they had succeeded effectually in deceiving Hawkeye Harry in regard to the contents of the wagon, they felt no uneasiness from this source. But, in this, they underrated the mature judgment and keen instinct of the young trapper, and as the hours wore on, Roche was suddenly aroused from his slumber by a faint yell, and the uneasy snorting of the animals corralled near.

He arose to a sitting posture and listened. Far away upon the plain he could hear the prolonged yell of Indians, and the dull, vibratory thump of hoofs on the earth.

What did it mean? The villain—for such in fact Henri Roche was—sprung to his feet and started out toward the edge of the grove where he supposed Hawkeye Harry was on guard, but, in passing the wagon, his attention was attracted by a black rent in the white tilt, and, upon examination, he found it was a slit that had been cut with a keen-edged knife.

An exclamation of surprise burst from his profane lips as he thrust his head and shoulders into the wagon, and, upon feeling about with his hands, found that his captive maiden was gone.

A fearful oath followed this discovery, and turning away in a paroxysm of rage, he proceeded to his companions, and, arousing them, made known the escape of the maiden.

The next moment all were on foot, and a hasty investigation revealed to them the fact that Hawkeye Harry was gone also.

Roche fairly danced with rage and baffled triumph, and cursed his stupidity for ever permitting the young Ranger to enter their camp alive. And his indignation and fury knew no bounds when the word came that one of their most valuable horses was gone.

"We're a set of infernal fools!" he finally broke forth, "to have ever permitted that boy to enter our camp. It's very probable that we'll never see that girl again; and the loss of her is a good five thousand dollars out of our pockets!"

"Too durned bad, captain," returned a companion, "but that boy is sharper than a tack, or my name ain't Billy George."

"Sharp? Humph!" sneered Roche, savagely; "that don't half express the shrewdness and cunning of the little dare-devil. I'm satisfied now that he mistrusted us the moment he set foot inside our camp."

"Wal, wal, it's too bad, too bad," said George.

"Yes," returned Roche; "but talking about it will do no good now. We've got to act. I hear the yelling of Indians on the prairie to the north. It may be a party of Sioux, and if so, we'll have nothing to fear from them. And it might be such a thing as the boy and girl having fled in that direction, and the Indians have discovered them and given chase. Here," turning to one of his companions, he continued, "you may as well lay aside your mask, Ulric Dubois, for it will avail you nothing now, and look up the trail of the fugitives, and let us endeavor to follow them."

Ulric Dubois, the scout and guide of the

outlaw travelers, threw aside a wig of grizzly hair and a mask of bushy whiskers, revealing a smooth and boyish face, which was possessed of some outward signs of recklessness, cunning and rascality.

With rifle in hand the guide moved away, and was absent several minutes. When he returned, he said:

"They have gone north, captain."

"Good!" exclaimed Roche; "then we stand a fair chance of recovering the girl, for I'll guarantee those Indians are a party of Sioux belonging to Gray Hawk or Black Buffalo's band, and that they are in pursuit of the fugitives. But let us mount and be off. Two of the party will have to remain behind and guard the wagon, as there are not horses for all to ride."

Four of the party, including Henri Roche, were soon in the saddle and galloping northward over the prairie, shaping their course directly toward the yelling Indians. They did not attempt to follow the trail of the fugitives, feeling satisfied that the savages were in pursuit of them; and if the red-skins were Sioux, they were friends and allies of Roche and his party.

Continuing on a few miles, the outlaws discovered that the Indians were coming toward them. They drew rein and gazed away into the gloom ahead.

Suddenly a black, surging mass of galloping horsemen swept into view on the crest of a gentle swell in the plain. For a moment they seemed to float like a black cloud along the summit of the ridge; then they came to a sudden halt and gathered in a knot where they could be plainly seen by the outlaws as they stood in bold relief against the blue sky.

Yell after yell pealed from the lips of the Indians—for such the horsemen were—but they were yells of baffled triumph and growing indignation.

"By Judas!" exclaimed Henri Roche, "they are Indians, and Sioux at that; but I'm afraid the fugitives have given them the slip, for those yells denote defeat. I will make known our presence, and then join them."

Roche uttered two or three sharp barks in exact imitation of the coyote's, and which showed that he was not unused to the signs and signals of the prairie and the Indians.

The sound was borne to the keen ears of the savages, for immediately there came a response—a cry resembling the wild shriek of a night-bird.

"Advance, boys," said Roche, spurring his animal forward. "It's all right—it's Black Buffalo and his warriors."

They rode forward, and were soon surrounded by three-score of painted and plumed Sioux warriors, armed with tomahawks and lances.

Black Buffalo, the chief of the band, advanced and addressed the outlaws in the Sioux tongue:

"Who is it that hails the Sioux with the signals of friends and the skin of the pale-face?"

"Your friend, White Chief, and his men," responded Henri Roche, in the dialect of the Indian.

A shout of welcome pealed from the savages' lips, and spurring his pony up alongside of Roche's animal, Black Buffalo said:

"Black Buffalo and his warriors are pleased to meet the White Chief and his men. He missed them long, and anxiously waited his coming from the country of the pale-faces."

"And I'm glad to meet you, chief," replied Roche. "We've had bad luck to-night, and want you to help us out again."

"Black Buffalo is the friend of the White Chief. Let him ask, and he shall receive."

"That's you, chief," replied Roche, in a flattering manner; "you are a whole-souled fellow, and always ready to help a friend. Well, to-night that young trapper whom they call Hawkeye came to our camp and stole a white girl from our wagon, and a horse from our corral, and ran off with them both."

"Is that the animal?" the chief asked, pointing to a riderless horse in their midst.

Roche scanned the beast, and replied:

"It is our horse. Where did you come across him?"

"Right here," replied the chief; "but when we first started in pursuit, there was a rider upon him that we took to be the young Hawkeye. But he was cunning, and escaped us like the fox when closely pressed by the hound."

"Yes, chief, you are right. It was Hawkeye, and for his scalp, and the safe return of the maiden he stole from our camp, I will give you many beads and knives, and much powder and whisky."

"Black Buffalo," returned the chief, "beats

the offer of the White Chief. He will bring him the scalp of the Hawkeye, and the maiden, unharmed, before two more suns go down. But not until the night is gone will he begin the search for the maiden and the cunning trapper."

"Then come to our camp and spend the night. It is but a short ride to it," said Roche.

The chief accepted the invitation, and when the bivouac was reached, they all dismounted, and corraling their animals on the prairie, entered the grove. A fire was soon lighted, and then the warriors gathered around it. The light showed them to be a grim, fierce band, rendered hideous by war-paint.

By daybreak the savages and outlaws were moving northward over the plain in two detachments—Black Buffalo leading the first party and following the trail of the fugitives, while Roche and his party, with a few Indians, followed on with the tilted wagon.

But the outlaw did not follow the chief far. He soon changed his course and bore to the right, and after journeying several miles, entered a strip of timber skirting the Boyer river, which they reached about noon.

Here they halted to rest, and Roche decided to abandon the wagon.

"But what'll we do with the chest, captain?" asked one in a low tone, as if fearing to be overheard.

"We'll have to bury it, and conceal the spot by burning the wagon over it, for, if we should lose that chest and its contents— Well, you know all about it."

"Certainly! certainly!" responded the outlaw.

"Then let us to work. If we should take the wagon to the valley with us, it would leave a broad trail for an enemy to follow."

The party set to work in the soft, dry ground, and they soon scooped out a large hole.

Then they took from the wagon a large iron-bound chest, which required four men to convey it to the hole, into which it was deposited and carefully covered. The turf then being replaced, the wagon was taken to pieces and piled in a heap over the spot.

The vehicle was then set on fire, and in less than an hour it was a heap of red coals and ashes, with the exception of the irons. These were raked from the coals and thrown into the river; and thus every part of the wagon was destroyed.

The party now mounted, and turning to the north-east, resumed the journey up the river.

It wanted two hours of sunset, when Roche suddenly drew rein at the mouth of a little stream that emptied into the Boyer.

"Here is the place," he exclaimed, "where we are to encamp—the place where Black Buffalo promised to join us."

The party dismounted, picketed their animals to grass in a little valley hard by, and went into camp.

Anxiously awaiting Black Buffalo's return, Roche grew very restless, and finally, slinging his rifle across his shoulder, he wandered off into the woods. He had traveled, in a round-about way, over a mile from camp, when he detected the fumes of smoke in the atmosphere, and then started as he saw a thin, rarefied column of white smoke rising above the tree-tops a short distance before him. He crept cautiously forward to reconnoiter; but he found neither campers nor camp-fire.

To assure himself that he was not mistaken, he looked for the smoke again. He saw it rising above the top of a large basswood, but, searching beneath the tree, not a spark of the fire could he find.

It was a mystery to him—the same that had so puzzled Hawkeye Harry an evening or two before.

Roche was a wicked man, and although a little superstitious and cowardly, he searched for the agency of that smoke, but could find nothing.

At last he gave it up in no little perplexity of mind, and turning, began retracing his footsteps toward his camp, but suddenly stopped.

Something like a human groan startled him. He bent his head and listened; and then to his hearing came the imploring cry:

"Roche! Henri Roche! in the name of God, come here!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PIPE OF PEACE.

LET us now return to the Cone—the home of the two trappers in the little cliff-girted valley, and looked after Old Optic, whom we left cloistered with an Indian, at the close of a preceding chapter.

Old Optic was one of those stern old trappers of two score years, whom hardships and constant physical exertion had developed into bone and sinew. His rough, bearded face and dark-gray eyes wore a pleasant expression, yet there had been times when the soul of the man was aroused, when those eyes grew fierce with rage, and that face rigid with deadly emotion.

The Indian that he had ushered into the Cone was young, and, as before stated, his weapons and barbaric finery bespoke the insignia of a chief.

"I am glad you have come, Red Wing," said the old trapper, "and I hope with good tidings and with good feelings."

"Red Wing is chief of the remnant of the great Fox nation. He has watched for many suns the true course of events. He has seen the steady and certain advance of the white man into the hunting-grounds of his nation. The tomahawk and scalping-knife have failed to keep them back. When they oppose the white man they fall beneath his deadly rifle. The Foxes are tired of fighting against the pale-face, for their warriors have fallen like the autumn leaves. We have decided to forever bury the hatchet, and to smoke the pipe of peace with the pale-face. We will fight side by side with the white man against the Dakota, the Arapahoe, the Potawatomie and the Sac. Red Wing has spoken."

"Your words have the right ring in them, Red Wing," replied Old Optic, "and as a representative of the whites, I will take upon my own head the responsibility of guaranteeing you their protection and friendship, if you do all you say you will."

The face of the chief lit up with a glow of joy. In this recognition of peace he imagined he could see the regeneration of his tribe, and their restoration to their former greatness and power.

Alas! deluded chief! Half a decade was to see the total extinction of his tribe!

"Then let the white warrior and Red Wing smoke the pipe of peace," said the chief, producing a highly-ornamented calumet filled with tobacco.

They smoked the pipe of peace and acknowledged each other friends. Peace between the Fox Indians and the whites was declared, and it was for this purpose that the chief had come to the Cone.

Presently the chief went to the door of the hut and uttered a shrill chirrup.

Forth from behind the rocks and bushes, like phantoms came a hundred Indian warriors, painted for the war-path.

Old Optic experienced a slight shudder at sight of them, but he permitted no look to betray the least mistrust. His confidence in Red Wing had been so firmly settled by acts of kindness and words of truth, that he felt no hesitation in accepting him as a friend. But, in general, he knew it was the nature of an Indian to be treacherous, and in that band of a hundred he felt satisfied there were those unpossessed of the good traits of their chief.

Red Wing gathered his warriors around the Cone, and made known to them the treaty of peace that had just been consummated. Then followed the ceremony of burying the hatchet, and after this had been performed, most of the warriors left the valley, but shortly before night they returned, bearing with them, upon ponies, their women and children and a promiscuous mass of luggage—all their earthly possessions.

Before the sun had gone down, an Indian encampment had been pitched in the valley, and the shouts of children and barking of dogs were echoing through the forest aisles.

Darkness came, but Hawkeye Harry did not. Old Optic felt somewhat uneasy about him.

Guards were posted in the defile leading into the valley, and along the bluff overlooking the camp.

The night wore away and a new day dawned, which was spent by the warriors in supplying the encampment with game for food, while Old Optic and the chief sat in consultation.

Night again threw its shadow over forest and plain, still Hawkeye Harry had not come.

Alone, by a small fire that burned in the center of the Cone, sat Old Optic gazing reflectively into its warm glow. He felt sorely uneasy about his young friend, Hawkeye Harry. On the morrow he resolved to make some search for him.

Then a soft footstep sounded behind him. He turned his head and saw a figure standing in the door of the Cone that caused him to start with surprise.

It was a human figure, enveloped in a red blanket that swept the ground. The head was covered with a sort of fur hood, and the face

concealed by a leathern mask, through the holes of which he could see a pair of eyes shining like balls of fire.

"Who in thunder, are ye, anyhow?" exclaimed the old trapper.

"One in quest of friendship and aid," replied the masked figure, whose voice was soft and feminine in its tones, yet a little husky.

"Have ye come far?" asked the trapper.

"Over many a league, more or less."

"And how did ye git into the valley past the guards?"

"By extreme caution."

"Then your object in coming here must be of great importance, to run sich risks?"

"It is, friend trapper; one in which my very life is involved, and to you have I come for aid."

"To me? What can I—a crazy old trapper—do?"

"Crazy!" repeated the masked stranger.

"Your garments are coarse and rude, your speech rough and blunt; but was it always so? When you were lord of the Highlands on the banks of the Ohio river, were you not a gentleman of cultured refinement and polished manners?"

Old Optic started as though a dagger had been thrust into his bosom.

The masked stranger saw his emotion, and continued:

"I know you are surprised by what I have said; but, friend trapper, I say it with no intention of harrowing your feelings, nor opening an old wound. I know all about your past troubles, and why you are here as a trapper in the Far West, when you might have been one of the leading men in civilization. Do I not speak the truth?"

"You do, man or woman though you may be. Go on," said the trapper, grasping for further information as a drowning man grasps at a straw; "go on!"

"You were a kind and loving husband, a fond and affectionate father, but," and the stranger's voice grew tremulous, "what became of your wife, and your sweet little girl?"

A groan came up from the trapper's heart.

"You would answer," continued the stranger, "that another won the affections of my wife, and together they fled from the Highlands to parts unknown, carrying my darling little Gertie with them. Broken-hearted, disgraced, I fled to the wilderness to forget my shame and sorrow amid its constant dangers."

"Yes, yes!" returned Old Optic, excitedly, "that is what my answer would have been."

"And have you never heard of that unfaithful wife since she left you?" asked the stranger.

"Never!" returned Optic, with the bitterness of despair.

"Nor your child—your little Gertie?"

"No."

"How old was she when you last saw her—the child?"

"She was in her ninth year."

"And how long since you last saw her?"

"Seven long, bitter years."

"Do you think you would know her if you were to see her now?"

The old trapper's face grew brighter. A ray of hope beamed to his eyes.

"Yes, I would know her. Her face could never have changed in seven years beyond a father's recognition, for it has ever been before me."

"And again: would you believe me were I to tell you where to find your daughter?"

Again Old Optic started, though a light of joy and hope shone in his eyes.

"You seem to know my past so well that I could not believe otherwise," he replied.

"She is the adopted daughter of the Sioux chief, Black Buffalo."

"Great Heaven! is this the truth, stranger?" gasped the old trapper.

"It is the solemn truth."

"Then to-morrow's day will find me on the way to the Sioux village. Gertie, my lost darling, shall be rescued, God willing!"

"Then I will go hence," said the masked stranger, turning toward the door of the Cone.

"Stay! stay, stranger!" cried the trapper. "Let me reward you for this service—this information! You said you had come for aid; name your desire, and if within my power, it shall be granted."

"My troubles are the same as yours. In the hands of the Sioux I have a captive child—a daughter—and I came to seek your aid to rescue her."

"Then stay, and together we will start in search of our children to-morrow. I will obtain the assistance of Red Wing and his warriors,

who are friends to the whites. We will march in the Sioux village, and if we cannot effect the rescue of our children by ransom or stratagem, we can do it by force, for most of the Sioux are away on the war-path now."

"Then I will come back in the morning and accompany you," said the stranger.

"But why not remain now?" asked Old Op-tic.

"I can not."

"Then one question more: why are you here in disguise, and who are you?"

"I am a curious person, friend trapper, and shall insist, as a favor, on not being questioned in regard to my disguise, which I shall continue to wear during our journey to the Sioux village and until after my child has been rescued. I have good reasons for this secrecy, as you shall know some time, perhaps. As to my name, call me Clouded Heart. That will answer well—better than my real name. I'll come to-morrow morning; till then, adieu."

The masked stranger turned and glided from the cone, leaving the old trapper alone with his thoughts.

Suddenly he was aroused by a footstep behind him.

He turned quickly, hoping to encounter the form of his beloved young companion, Hawkeye Harry.

But he was disappointed. It was Red Wing, the Fox chief.

"Ah, 'tis you, chief," he said. "I have had a strange visitor to-night. But, come, sit you down. I have a proposition to make to you—a proposition which is to be spiced with Sioux scalp, and many beautiful presents."

A grim smile flitted over the stoical features of the chief, as he seated himself before the old trapper.

CHAPTER IX.

A PERILOUS SITUATION.

HAWKEYE HARRY's emotions became terrible as he gazed down into the pale, upturned face of Nora Gardette, and saw the red tide of life flowing from the wound which his own hands had inflicted.

Her eyes were closed, the long, drooping lashes resting upon the pale cheeks. The lips stood slightly apart, revealing the white, pearly teeth; and the little hands lay limp and lifeless at her side. An expression of pain had settled upon the lovely face, whose contour was as delicately defined as though it had been chiseled from Parian marble.

The young ranger sat like one in a trance—as motionless as the form that lay in his arms.

Slowly he regained his presence of mind; then he turned his attention to the maiden's wound. A cry of joy escaped his lips when he saw that which, had he noticed it before, would have saved him a terrible pang of agony. The wound was not a deep one; the skull was not injured, the bullet having cut through the beautiful hair and plowed a furrow through the scalp behind. This Harry saw at a glance, and a low sigh and a slight motion of the body soon told him that his surmises were true.

"Thank God, she lives!" he cried.

Then dipping some water in the palm of his hand, he began laving her brow.

The maiden stirred slightly, and, opening her eyes, gazed in bewilderment around, then closed them again.

The young man continued the application of water to the brow, and poured a few drops between the pearly teeth.

In a few minutes she opened her eyes again, and attempted to rise. But her head sunk back upon the throbbing breast of the young ranger.

"Rest easy, Miss Nora," he breathed in her ear; "you are safe, and, thank God, not much nor badly injured."

She started with a little sigh, and gazed around her as if trying to recall her situation. Then she raised her eyes, and gazing up into the face of her companion, demanded:

"Where am I?"

Hawkeye Harry told her.

"Then you rescued me from the Indians," she said.

"Yes; and I came near taking your life. It was I that shot you—"

"You?" cried the maiden.

"Yes; I thought it was the Indian who was wrapped in the robe, and you in the red shawl."

A faint smile played about the lips of the maiden, as she replied:

"The savage took a fancy to the red shawl, and, taking it from me, donned it himself and put his robe around me. But, oh, how my head pains me!"

"You have an ugly scratch upon it, Nora,"

he said, "that must be bound up; then we will try and get away from this spot."

Nora took from her pocket a linen handkerchief, which the youth carefully bound around her head, so as to stanch the flow of blood.

He then arose to his feet and was about to step ashore, when his ear suddenly caught the crash of hooved feet approaching through the woods from the south.

"I'm afraid we're in danger, Nora," he said, as he sprang ashore. "We will have to cross in the canoe to the opposite side of the river, and conceal ourselves in the depths of the woods."

Removing the bridle from his horse, he turned it loose. The trained beast had already detected the approaching danger, and sniffed the air. His master led him to the water's edge, and, by command, he plunged into the river, and swimming to the opposite shore, dashed away into the woods.

Reëntering the canoe, Hawkeye Harry took up the paddle and headed the craft toward the other bank.

A rod or two above the point where the horse had reached the opposite shore, a small bayou put into the river. It was as many as three rods wide, and quite deep. Along its edges grew a fringe of reeds and water-willows, extending quite a rod out into the deepest water on either side, thus leaving a channel up the center that was unobstructed.

Hawkeye Harry saw at once what an admirable retreat the bayou offered, so up it he ran his canoe several rods, then turned at right-angles and pushed in toward the east shore. Leaning over the prow of the canoe, he carefully parted the reeds and branches overhead, as he drew the little craft through the opening thus made, taking great care that not a single blade was broken, or left in an unnatural position.

After he had pulled his canoe well in among the reeds, he entered a small opening just large enough for the canoe to rest in without touching the water-stalks. Above, the long, dagger-like blades drooped over from all sides, forming a beautiful archway or covering over them.

In this little arbor the youth permitted the canoe to rest. He concluded to wait here until he learned what dangers menaced them before advancing further.

They had been in this retreat but a few minutes when they heard voices. Peering out through the network of green, Harry saw a large party of mounted Sioux Indians, standing upon the bank in eager consultation.

It was Black Buffalo and his band, and in their midst was a prisoner bound and fettered. He was an Indian, and Harry recognized him at once as the cowardly Sac—Nora's late captor.

Keeping a steady eye upon their movements, the youth saw some of them dismount and search the ground closely. He then saw them gather in a knot near the place where the youth's horse had entered the river, and point and gesticulate in a significant manner.

In a few minutes half a dozen warriors sprang into the river and swam to the opposite shore. They searched the bank until they found where the horse had crossed. But whether they knew that the horse had not a burden upon his back and a hand to guide him, of course Harry knew not; but that they suspected something of the truth was evident, for they did not follow up the horse's trail.

Another consultation was now held, which ended in their all dismounting and making such arrangements as convinced the young ranger that they were going into a temporary encampment.

This caused him no little uneasiness. Had he been alone, he would not have cared; but when he gazed upon the little form nestled at his side, and her sweet, pretty face and dark eyes upturned to his confidently—resting with an apparent sense of security under his strong arm—it was an appeal that his manhood could not regard too highly.

With a steady eye he watched the red-skins. He soon saw a number of the savages depart down the stream and some up the stream. What this movement indicated, he was unable to tell, but, in the course of an hour, he saw two canoes coming up the stream, and still a few minutes later, he saw another coming down. Then he knew that it was the canoes the red-skins had gone in search of; and his fears were at once aroused, for he knew what might be expected now.

Several minutes he watched the Indians; then, turning his gaze upon Nora, he said:

"We are now in great danger, Nora, yet by extreme caution we may elude our enemies. It'd require a keen pair of eyes to see us in this spot, but the savages all have keen eyes and

ears; and should one come near, do not utter a word, nor move, even if he discovers us. And prepare yourself to witness dark deeds—such as may cause your soul to revolt with terror, for I shall fight to the last to save you— Ah!"

The light dip of an ear caught his ear, and called forth the exclamation. On peering through the foliage he saw a savage in a canoe skirting along the reeds.

"What is it, Hawkeye?" asked the maiden.

"An Indian coming this way, and I expect he's looking for our trail. But, let him come," and the youth took his side tomahawk and laid it at his feet.

"Oh, Hawkeye!" said the maiden, in a tone that showed how great was her reliance on the youth, "you are a brave and noble man, and are running many risks for me. But, my father will reward you well for all your kindness to me."

Hawkeye Harry smiled as he gazed down into the sweet young face of the maiden. The blood leaped in strong currents through his veins. Her gentle words had added a new power to the passion of love that was growing within his breast. In a moment of impetuosity, he replied:

"The boon that my heart already craves for my services in your behalf, Nora, is priceless; and none but you, and you alone, could bestow it upon me. Yet, it's not likely that a young girl like you would bestow such a gift on a rough, uneducated trapper like me."

Involuntarily the maiden raised her eyes until they met those of her companion. She half suspected what he was aiming at, and a faint blush suffused her face. To Harry it spoke plainer than words, but her lips, tremulous with emotion, opened, and she asked:

"What is that gift, Harry?"

"Your love."

The face of the maiden flushed crimson, and the long, dark lashes drooped shyly. Hawkeye Harry saw her lips quiver with some deep, inward emotion, then open to speak. The youth's heart ceased its wild flutter. It was an eventful moment to him, but before the first word had escaped Nora's lips, they were startled by a noise in the dry reeds—a quick noise, resembling the "t-wash" of a scythe through the bearded grain.

Harry glanced quickly around and saw the Indian, before mentioned, in the canoe, moving along the edge of the reeds, and ever and anon thrusting a long lance into the stalks, as though feeling for a hidden enemy. It was this that produced that peculiar sound that prevented Nora's reply.

Harry watched the Indian closely, and as he saw him approach, nearer and nearer, he felt no little uneasiness through a fear that the red-skin might thrust his lance into their covert.

As a shield to her, in case he did, the youth quickly and silently interposed his body between the maiden and the Indian. In this he was not a moment too soon.

There came a sudden *t-wash* through the reeds; there was a vivid flash before Harry's eyes; then he felt a sharp, stinging sensation upon his cheek. He could scarcely restrain an exclamation, for it was the point of the Indian's lance that had just touched his face and punctured the skin. A little jet of blood spurted from the wound, but, with great presence of mind, the youth kept quiet and watched the movements of the Indian, whose body was partially visible. At the same time, he was satisfied that he and Nora could not be seen in the shadows of the dense growth around him.

The young trapper was not a little surprised to see the Indian examine the point of his lance as soon as he had withdrawn it from the reeds.

Was it possible that his sense of feeling was so sensitive as to have felt the touch of the weapon upon the young man's cheek? Why does he stare so at the point of the lance?—why does he start?

Ah! his keen eyes detect something upon the polished weapon—*blood*!—that told of the presence of a living creature within the reeds!

The situation had indeed become critical.

The savage laid his lance down, and rising to his feet, peered, with brows contracted, into the dense forest of stalks and overshadowing verdure. But, Harry was satisfied that his gaze did not penetrate their covert—of this he was soon convinced. The red-skin did not seem satisfied with his ocular search, for, turning the prow of the canoe, he reached forward, and parting the reeds, began drawing the craft in among them in the same manner that he had entered the thicket.

The young trapper felt his blood run cold, for

he now saw that discovery was unavoidable. But, he prepared himself for the worst.

"Nora," he said, in a whisper to the maiden, "an Indian is approaching us, and our safety depends much on silence. Turn your eyes if you would not witness a bloody deed."

As he concluded, the youth grasped the handle of his tomahawk, ready for action.

Nora, shuddering, turned her head and buried her face in her hands.

Slowly the savage approached—so silently that he created not a sound.

Within half an arm's length of our friends' canoe, the Indian came to a stand.

Then, with tomahawk in hand, he leaned lightly forward and peered into the little arbor.

Hawkeye Harry saw the pupils of his black, scintillating eyes dilate with intense gazing, and knew that he was waiting for them to become accustomed to the shadows of the covert. He could see the veins standing out upon his naked arms and breast, and the workings and twitching of the facial muscles—all engendered by fear, uncertainty and expectancy.

Thus they remained for a moment; then the eyes of Hawkeye Harry and the savage met in an unflinching and deadly gaze.

Not a word nor a sound escaped the lips of either. But, together their murderous tomahawks rose; together they fell.

CHAPTER X.

HENRI ROCHE OUTWITTED.

"ROCHE! Henri Roche, in the name of God, come here!"

Had a voice called to Henri Roche from the grave he would not have started with more violence than when this voice fell upon his ears.

He gazed around him, his lips quivering with fear and his face ghastly white.

Half-sitting and half-reclining against a rock upon a little grass-plot near the edge of a creek, the outlaw chief saw the figure of a woman, dressed in faded garments, half-civilized and half-savage.

If her voice had startled him with fear, then the sight of her face paralyzed him with terror; and, like one in a stupor, he stood and gazed upon the reclining form that stared at him with the stony, icy look of a corpse.

The face was that of a woman. Her form and face were wasted away to emaciation, yet her haggard features and large, mournful eyes were the relics of a once beautiful woman.

She might have been forty, and she might have been fifty years of age. There were a few threads of silver among her raven-black tresses of hair. Her whole being showed the indelible stamp of the destroying hand of trouble and sorrow.

Why should Henri Roche stare at a poor, helpless woman, his teeth fairly chattering with fear?

"Come nearer to me—come nearer, Henri Roche," the woman called, seeing he did not move. "Come; you need not fear me. I am dying—dying—the victim of your inhuman treachery and wickedness."

Henri Roche breathed easier. Though the voice and face of the woman had terrified him, he felt easier when she said she was dying, for her looks confirmed her words. His courage revived; he did not fear a dying woman, and advancing, he stepped near her and gazed down into the pale, upturned face.

It was then that he experienced that feeling of terrible and solemn awe that we all experience when we stand by the death-bed and gaze down upon the cold, clammy features of the dying—a feeling which never fails in its appeals to the hardest heart.

There was a settled expression upon the woman's thin face. Her thin nostrils were dilated and purple. Her lips were bloodless and drawn tightly over the pearly teeth; and the eyes—oh, who can paint the expression of the eyes of one standing upon life's brink, and fixed with a gaze, looking beyond the grave into a new transfiguration?

"Henri Roche."

"Great Heaven!" exclaimed Roche, "is this true? Is it possible that I find you dying thus, Cecil Gray?"

"Yes, it is possible," replied the woman, faintly.

"How came you—"

"I came to seek you, Henri Roche," she broke in, "and Heaven has at length brought us face to face. Roche, you are the author of all my misery and sorrow."

"Nay, nay, Cecil Gray," replied Roche, "you spurned my love. Then I told you I would have revenge, and I kept my word. I swore Willis

Gray should never live with you, nor you with him, as man and wife. You knew the hot, revengeful blood of a Spaniard coursed my veins, and should not have crossed me."

"But, Roche, I did not love you."

"Nor did you love Gray. It was his wealth you married. This provoked me worse than all; and when I saw you lavishing your affections on your first-born—the child of Willis Gray—then I resolved to bleed your fickle heart by stealing that child and hiding it away where you would never find it. I did so—ay, more. I separated you and Gray! Mine, Cecil, has been a glorious revenge!"

"Yes, yes; I admit it has, Roche," returned the woman, with a wild, stony gaze that caused him to shudder; "I can suffer but a little while longer, and let me die content, happy, Roche."

"If I can do anything to soothe your mind, now that you are dying, I will do so gladly."

"You can, by telling me if my child still lives, and if so, where she is."

A grim, triumphant smile overspread the face of the outlaw, as he replied:

"I am glad, Cecil, that in your last moments I can give you this information. But, had you lived twenty years longer, I would never have done so—no, never!"

"Oh, Henri Roche! the vengeance of Heaven will fall as heavily upon your soul as your vengeance has fallen upon my heart. But tell me, Roche, is my child alive?"

"She is."

"Thank God! Where is she?"

"I fear that information will brighten your last moments but little, Cecil."

"It is my dying request—pray tell me," she pleaded, with her thin, emaciated hands outstretched imploringly.

"She is," said Roche, "in the Sioux village. She is the adopted daughter of Black Buffalo, the chief. She has grown to womanhood, and is very beautiful, and when I reach the village again she will become the wife of him her mother rejected."

A groan escaped from the woman's lips, and a fire of deadly vengeance flashed in her dark, sunken eyes, as she replied:

"Henri Roche, harm one hair of her head and Heaven's wrath will fall upon you!"

The heartless outlaw smiled mockingly, then replied:

"You should not let such bitter words fall from your lips, Cecil, when you are soon to be summoned before the judgment bar. Let us talk more rationally now, forget the past, and—"

"Never! Go! leave me, heartless villain!" the woman cried. Go! your presence is hateful."

Roche turned, like one walking in his sleep, and moved away in deep thought. This interview had terribly agitated him, and when a dozen steps away, something forced him to stop, turn and gaze back.

He started as he did so, with a low cry of sudden fear.

He saw that he had been terribly deceived—outwitted. He beheld the supposed dying woman standing erect, and holding, leveled at his heart, a small gleaming rifle, along whose barrel he caught the steady and deadly glow of her dark eye.

Quick as thought the villain stepped aside. The rifle cracked and the bullet sped harmlessly by him.

"Ha! ha! Cecil!" laughed the villain; "your aim is like your deathbed—false, untrue—a deception. Cunningly you wormed from me the secret of your child, but little good it will do you. You shall dog my footsteps no longer—you shall die in earnest. You made a demon of me, and so I care not for human life."

The villain jerked his rifle to his shoulder and leveled it upon the woman.

Fear seemed to take possession of the wild, haggard-looking female, and turning, she ran toward the creek and leaped into the water.

The upraised rifle of the outlaw followed her form. She sprang upon some dark object thrust upward from the bed of the stream; then, with a wild, mocking laugh—before the outlaw could fire—she sunk down from view in the creek, as though it had opened to receive her.

Roche lowered his rifle in time to see the black object upon which she had stepped sink down in the stream also. Then for a moment followed the hollow rush of water near the mysterious spot, then all grew quiet, save the rush and roar of the rapids in the stream a few steps below.

For a moment Roche stood dumbfounded—terrified. But at last, he mustered up the courage to advance and examine the creek where the woman had disappeared so mysteriously. He

saw the water was a little muddy, and that particles of sand and gravel had been disturbed. This was all. The bed of the creek presented a firm, solid appearance.

What mystery was there about this creek? Was it haunted?—was that woman the spirit of Cecil Gray?

The more Henri Roche meditated over the matter, yea—the mystery, the more complicated his mind became. At last his courage gave way, and, filled with the most fearful apprehensions, he turned and fled from the spot—fled as though a hundred fiends were in pursuit of him.

Henever stopped running until he reached his own camp.

"Boys, we have got to move on, this very night. We must reach Black Buffalo's village by to-morrow's sunset. And I want you, Dubois"—turning to the guide—"to hasten down the river until you come upon Black Buffalo's trail, then follow him up until you overtake him. Tell him to send half of his warriors, at least, to his village immediately, as they will be needed there to protect it. But, tell him not to relinquish the search for the young Hawkeye and girl, until they are within his power. For that purpose he will need but a few men. Away!" His orders were those of a man in haste and anxiety.

Dubois caught his horse, and in a few minutes was galloping down the river. Roche and the rest of his party saddled up their jaded animals, and mounting, were soon on their way toward the village of Black Buffalo, situated upon Lake Okibogie, several leagues to the northward.

The sad face and mournful eyes of Cecil Gray followed him—were ever present to his guilty soul's vision.

CHAPTER XI.

THE COMBAT IN THE WATER.

TOGETHER fell the tomahawks of the two antagonists—Hawkeye Harry and the savage.

There was a dull crash, a low moan followed by a slight rustling of the dry reeds, a shock of the two canoes. Nora raised her head to see her young protector leaning slightly forward upon one knee, unharmed. But in his hand he clutched a tomahawk whose edge was stained with blood, and glancing just beyond, a terrible sight met her gaze. The savage, with cloven head, lay with his body hanging partly out of the canoe, while from the ghastly wound a stream of blood was trickling into the water of the bayou.

The escape from the Indian's tomahawk was miraculous. When both weapons descended, the Indian was standing up; consequently Harry's hatchet pierced the savage's brain before the weapon of the red-skin had reached his antagonist's head. The blow threw the savage backward, as the tomahawk descended so close to his face that he felt the wind of its swift descent.

"I hope, Nora, you will not think hard of me for taking human life, or rather the life of a savage, which is but a grade higher than the wild panther of the woods."

"No, Harry," responded the maiden, "I have heard of the horrors of border warfare. No one could think hard of another for taking human life in self-defense. But I know I am a burden on your hands, and I fear I may yet cost you your life."

"You are a burden, pretty Nora," said the young man, in a moment of enthusiasm, "that it affords me the greatest joy of my life to bear. Do not think otherwise. My only fears are that I can not serve you long enough. If the Indians do not make further search in the bayou, we may escape. But I am now afraid that the absence of their companion may lead them to investigate the cause."

The young ranger now proceeded to examine their situation. He saw the savages moving along the edge of the river in canoes, and some on the bank on foot, examining every stone and blade of grass for the trail. But that which made Harry the most uneasy was a number of warriors standing on the shore with their eyes fixed, apparently, upon the very spot where the unfortunate savage had entered the dense chaparral of reeds.

He knew that, if the savage did not make his appearance soon, they would likely go in search of him; and, as the red-skin had left a broad trail behind him where he entered the reeds, they would have no trouble in finding him; so the young ranger at once resolved to seek some other point of security among the tall reeds.

Having possessed himself of the dead Indian's lance and tomahawk, Harry parted the stalks before the prow of the canoe, and pulled it along through the opening thus made, taking

great pains to rearrange the reeds to their natural position when they passed to the rear of the craft.

In this manner he drew the canoe over two rods from where the dead warrior lay, and at last pulled the canoe into a little glade-like spot nearly ten feet in diameter, yet where the reeds and flags grew much taller, and their long, slender blades, courting the sunshine and freedom of the opening, inclined inward all around the edge of the glade, thus forming a perfect canopy of blades and stalks overhead, and a beautiful retreat.

In this place the young trapper again took his stand. But such a dense body of stalks now intervened between them and the foe that the latter could not be seen.

Here the fugitives would have to remain until the Indians left, or they were enabled to make their escape under cover of darkness.

The day wore away, and the shadows of evening began to gather along the river. Our young friends began to breathe more freely. They would soon be enabled to move from their peril, although the Indians still retained their position upon the river-bank.

The wind had sprung up, and by dark was blowing a brisk gale from the south. The sky was overcast with clouds that foretold a dark night, if not one of drizzling, autumnal rain, so common at this season of the year.

Being to the windward, Harry could hear an occasional sound above the rustling of the reeds that told him the Indians were still on the river-bank, and at the moment when the young ranger was about to begin his retreat from the reeds, he heard the splash of oars in the middle of the bayou, not ten paces from where they were concealed.

The red-skins were searching either for them or the absent warrior—perhaps both!

The splash of oars continued along the reeds in the bayou, and finally grew more numerous, but not a word could be heard from the lips of the occupants. Finally he heard the raking of a canoe in among the reeds, and knew from the location of the sound that the Indians had found where their dead comrade had entered the thicket, and were following his trail. This fact was soon confirmed by a low exclamation of surprise and suppressed indignation, which told Harry that the body of the savage had been found.

Not a sound save the rustle of the dry reeds and stalks could be heard after this discovery; but the silence boded ill. Warning Nora of their impending peril, the young ranger put every faculty upon the alert.

An hour stole by, when his keen ear detected a light splash on the water near the canoe. He fixed his eyes upon the darkness, and was not a little surprised to see two dull, scintillating orbs of fire glowing through the darkness not over three yards from the canoe. They were close upon the surface of the water, and just back of them he could see a dark, spherical object which he was satisfied was the head of an Indian, whose body was submerged in the water.

Silently Harry grasped the dead warrior's lance, with the determination of using it upon the cunning red-skin.

Drawing the weapon back, he thrust it forward with all his strength.

A savage yell of agony pealed out upon the night-air, almost chilling the blood in Nora's veins. But, like a heroine, she uttered no word of affright, but nestled closer to the form of her young protector.

Harry aimed the lance so as to pierce the savage's breast, and from the desperate tugging at the weapon he knew his aim had been true.

He quickly relinquished his hold upon the lance, and seized the oars to flee, for he knew the death-wail of the savage would soon bring others upon them. But, at this instant, Nora caught the outlines of a pair of long arms that were thrust outward from the reeds behind him; then she felt Harry dragged from her side out into the water with a crash, where a fearful struggle at once began.

The brave and noble girl, obeying the injunction of the young ranger, never uttered a sound, but with her hands clasped over her heart, she mentally prayed, with all the fervency of her young soul, for the merciful Father to spare the life of Hawkeye Harry.

The struggle between the youth and the unknown foe—which was a savage, of course—became desperate. Neither uttered a word or cry. But the floundering in the water: the crashing of the reeds; the dull thumping of the blows; the gasping, and labored breathing of the combatants, told that it was a deadly conflict.

Poor Nora! She sat alone, trembling with

fear, and when she had invoked Heaven's protection on the young ranger's life, she leaned forward and strained her eyes through the darkness, in hopes of seeing if she could not help Harry. But she could see nothing. She could only listen to the awful sounds and pray—pray for Harry's deliverance.

Oh! it was a fearful moment for that young girl—a moment of agonizing suspense—such as is never erased from memory.

For several moments the struggle continued, but, finally, the blows came fewer and feebler. Then there came a quick, heavy gasping, a low, gurgling sound, and the noise gradually ceased. Oh, heavens! one of the combatants was drowning. Which one?

Was it the Indian? was it Hawkeye Harry?

Nora asked herself these questions, that were echoed in agony from her heart.

She longed to call out to Harry to know if he were the victor, but her presence of mind told her that such an act would only increase Harry's danger if he were alive.

She waited. Oh, what moments of torturing agony! The wind had ceased rustling the reeds, as if to lend silent terror to the moment.

A deep silence reigned—a silence as dread as that of the grave.

Ten minutes passed by.

Then to the ears of Nora Gardette came a faint sound; like that of a living creature dragging itself through the water. It was approaching the canoe in which she sat.

Was it an Indian, or was it Harry? was it either? She tried to speak the youth's name—to ask if he were alive—but her tongue refused to perform its office; it was paralyzed with terror and suspense.

Motionless, and with dilated eyes, the maiden sat and listened and watched. She knew not whether she would be seized the next moment by a savage, or receive the joyful tidings of Harry's victory and escape. It was a struggle between hope and fear—the most terrible moment of her young life.

Closer and closer she heard that dragging sound approach. Then she felt a vibratory shock of the canoe, such as would be produced by a hand coming in contact with it. Then she saw a dark form rise above the rim of the canoe, closely followed by two dull, glowing orbs.

The one she readily saw was a human head and the other the eyes.

Was it Harry?

She leaned forward, and involuntarily bent forward until her face almost came in contact with that of the unknown, and peered into the scintillating eyes.

She started quickly back. It was the head and face of an Indian—a hideous-painted Indian!

Unable to restrain her emotions longer, nature broke beyond its bounds, and a scream of terror pealed from the lips of Nora Gardette.

CHAPTER XII.

WAS CLOUDED HEART A TRAITOR?

The morning sun arose clear and warm in a cloudless sky, and shone with unusual brilliancy upon the little Indian village of Red Wing. The villagers were astir quite early, for the chief, with a number of his warriors, was to accompany Old Optic and the masked stranger, Clouded Heart, to the Sioux village to assist in rescuing their children from captivity.

The chief had selected thirty of his best warriors for the expedition, and had them "rigged" out in all the panoply of the war-path. Each brave was provided with a pony, and well armed for the occasion.

Old Optic provided a pony for Clouded Heart, who made his appearance soon after daybreak, muffled and masked as on the previous night.

The party was soon mounted, and filing out of the valley, took their course northward through the woods in single file, with the exception of Old Optic and Clouded Heart, who rode side by side in the rear of the cavalcade.

The old trapper was now enabled to scan the form of his masked companion more closely.

He was rather under medium size, and was dressed in a half-civilized and half-savage garb. The hands and feet were small, yet the former were bronzed to the hue of an Indian. The head was still covered with a kind of hood, and the face with a leathern mask, through the holes of which the eyes gleamed like balls of fire. The mask was so fastened to the hood that neither wind nor accident could displace it.

To the old trapper it was strange that this still stranger being would not permit his face to be seen. He wondered to what extent the man's

success in rescuing his child depended upon keeping his face concealed. In fact, it was a little mysterious to the old trapper, and he could not, for some unknown reason, think otherwise than that the fellow would bear watching. He would not have put any confidence in him at all, had it not been for the truthful revelation he had made to him of his past life. It was this also that forced the conviction upon him that his story in regard to his child being a captive in the Sioux village was true.

The two conversed as they rode along on incidental topics, though the masked stranger was not overly communicative, and seldom entered upon any new subject. At times, however, Old Optic caught his glowing eyes fixed upon him through his mask with a strange, mysterious light.

"Have you any hopes of us recovering our children, Clouded Heart?" the old trapper finally asked.

"I have, friend trapper," replied the stranger; "the majority of the Sioux warriors, under Black Buffalo, are away on the war-path now, and if we reach the village before their return, we may accomplish the object of our expedition without much trouble."

"It will take nearly two days to reach their town," said Old Optic, in a tone devoid of all his former rudeness; "but, by traveling after nightfall, we would gain much time. But, Clouded Heart, how did you learn that my child is a captive among the Sioux?"

"I learned it from the lips of the destroyer of your home and happiness," said Clouded Heart, and he fixed his glowing eyes upon the trapper with a steady, inquiring gaze.

"Ah! then you know who it was that won the affections of my false-hearted wife?"

"False-hearted!" repeated Clouded Heart.

"Friend trapper, you do the memory of your wife injustice. She was not false to you."

"Man!" exclaimed the old trapper, "what authority or proof have you for this assertion?"

"The authority with which truth endows every mortal, and the proof of many. No; your wife and child were lured from their home on the Ohio by a man whom she rejected ere she wedded you. The villain knew that you were absent from home on business, and took the opportunity for revenge upon you and your wife. He forged a letter purporting to come from you. It stated that you were lying very ill in the town of Nauvoo, on the Mississippi, and that you wanted her to hasten forthwith to your bedside. She started, poor deluded woman, to nurse her beloved husband. But, when near her destination, she was seized by a band of outlaws and carried away and sold to the Indians. What was the result? You returned home and found your wife and child gone, and such false evidence as convinced you that she had forsaken you for the love of another. But it was all a lie, friend trapper, a damnable lie."

"And this you know to be a fact, Clouded Heart—a solemn fact, do you?"

"A solemn fact," responded the masked stranger.

"Oh, God!" groaned the trapper.

"Tis sad," added Clouded Heart; "for, friend trapper, I have experienced a sorrow similar to yours in many respects."

"Then, Clouded Heart, you have my heartfelt sympathy. But, did you say my wife and child were sold to the Indians?"

"I said so, but it was only the child that was sold. Your wife—"

"Where is she?" gasped the old trapper.

"If you succeed in rescuing your daughter, who has grown to womanhood, they say, she will tell you what has become of her poor, persecuted mother, and will probably confirm all that I have told you."

"Oh, God! is this possible? It sounds so much like a fearful dream, Clouded Heart, that it startles me. But what surprises me most is how you know all this."

"It may, friend trapper; but, as I told you before, I learned it all from the lips of the man who destroyed your home and happiness."

"Does that person live?"

"He does."

"And do I know him?"

"His name is Henri Roche."

A groan burst from the trapper's lips. He had known Roche in the East, not as an enemy but as a gambler and profligate. A cloud of vengeance gathered over his face; then he became thoughtful and silent. His thoughts were principally of the mysterious Clouded Heart. It was quite probable that he had been in some manner leagued with Roche, and had finally become another of his victims,

and now had turned upon him. But, why should he go disguised? This was a perplexing question. But once, when he saw the flashing orbs of the stranger fixed upon him, a dark suspicion crossed his mind, and he could scarcely restrain himself from tearing the mask from his face. His better judgment prevailed, and if the masked stranger was *Henri Roche*, he resolved to keep an eye upon his movements, and endeavor to fathom the mysteries of his strange actions.

No more was said about the painful matter, but the old trapper showed much uneasiness and great impatience.

The cavalcade moved on, and about noon it debouched into a great prairie, stretching away in gentle undulation for leagues and leagues.

Across this prairie the party took its course, and just at sunset they struck a small wooded stream, that found its source in Lake Okibogie.

Upon this stream the party went into camp, for here they could obtain water and grazing for their animals.

The night passed without any excitement, and by daybreak the band was mounted and moving onward, following the course of the stream northward.

Old Optic and Clouded Heart rode together, as usual, and as they were now approaching the Sioux village, they began discussing the best plans to effect the object of the expedition.

As it was not known what force they would have to contend with, they could settle upon no definite course of action, until after they had ascertained the strength of the enemy.

The second day was nearly half-gone, and the party had just stopped at noon, when one of the guards suddenly descried a party of horsemen galloping over the plain directly toward them.

Were they Sioux?

The question passed from lip to lip, and great excitement prevailed.

The party was over two miles away, and, without a doubt, were Sioux or Arapahoes.

Red Wing shook his plumed head ominously, then, turning to his warriors, bade them prepare for battle.

They had halted in a little clump of cottonwood trees on the banks of the stream. This would afford them a temporary screen, and with rifle in hand, the savages crouched among the trees, waiting the approach of the enemy.

Old Optic noticed that Clouded Heart seemed uneasy, and believing that all was not right, he resolved to keep a watch upon his movements, for the suspicion that the masked stranger had led him into a trap now entered his mind.

The old trapper noticed that Clouded Heart kept a close watch upon the approaching party, and when it suddenly swept into plain view from behind a gentle swell, not over half a mile away, the mysterious stranger stepped from the grove into plain view of the horsemen, and taking a red scarf from his bosom, waved it above his head.

"Traitor!" burst in fierce accents from Old Optic's lips, and the next moment his rifle was leveled full at the breast of Clouded Heart.

CHAPTER XIII. THROUGH FIRE.

As Nora's cry rung sharply out over bayou and river, the savage grasped the rim of the canoe and essayed to raise himself from the water into the craft; but scarcely had the maiden's scream died away, when there came a flounder through the water and reeds, followed by the dull crash of a blow; then from the lips of the savage pealed a yell of death that fairly froze the blood in Nora's veins.

She felt the cunning red-skin release his hold upon the canoe and fall backward like a leaden weight, while to the eyes of the distressed maiden another form appeared. It approached the canoe, and seizing hold of it, threw itself into the craft.

"Nora!"

The maiden could scarcely repress a cry of joy. It was the voice of Hawkeye Harry!

"Oh, Harry! I was so 'fraid you had been slain! My prayers for your deliverance have been answered! But, are you hurt?"

"Not a bit of it, little one! I didn't get even a scratch, but I had an awful tussle with the red varmint."

"But your clothes are wet, Harry, and you will get chilly and cold," she replied.

"No, little girl; our danger will require such active work as will keep my blood warm. This is nothing to me. Meny's the time I've lain on a pond of water all night to escape the red-skins. I've had to swim cap and all—landed on it. But, our danger is increasing every minute. We must try and escape from here at

once—ah! I hear the red-skins now, approaching through the reeds!"

This conversation had been carried on in a low tone, and was interrupted by a crashing through the dry reeds.

Taking a position in the prow of the canoe, the young ranger began parting the reeds before him and drawing the canoe through the opening thus made. He had proceeded a couple of rods under cover of this minute forest, when he stopped to listen.

He could hear the Indians talking in excited tones over the dead bodies of their comrades. He also learned that they were in doubt as to the force of the enemy, and that they had heard Nora's scream.

The youth listened intently in hopes of finding out the course the savages intended to pursue to dislodge their enemy; but in this he was disappointed. He heard them, however, lifting the lifeless forms of their friends into their canoes, and then move away toward the shore.

Hawkeye now felt satisfied that the savages would resort to some other means of dislodging them from their covert, though he could form no idea what that recourse would be; for their stock of expedients was inexhaustible.

No time, however, was to be lost in getting from that wilderness of reeds and shade. So he applied himself vigorously to work. He had now reached a point where it was more difficult to proceed; the reeds, out from the dense shadows of the over-hanging trees, were sere and brown with autumn's touch, and the water not being so deep, was obstructed with flakes of moss and tufts of rank, tall wire-grass.

Still he worked on, ever and anon stopping to listen; but the wind was rising again and roaring through the reeds and forest, and drowning all other sounds. He could hear nothing of the enemy. Their silence made him all the more uneasy. He knew they were not idle, and suddenly, when he had taken into consideration the tinder-like dryness of the reeds and grass, and the strong head-wind blowing across the bayou, a terrible fear took possession of him.

Like one whose life depended upon his actions, the youth pulled away at the canoe, and now, in his impatience, anxiety and fear, every foot of the way seemed to grow more obstructed.

Suddenly a cry of terror burst from Nora's lips.

The young ranger turned quickly. It required no words to tell him the cause of the maiden's affright.

His worst fears had been realized.

The savages had fired the reeds to the windward of them! One dense ball of red flame, reaching almost to the tree-tops, came rolling over the miniature wilderness toward them with a roar.

Escape before that sheet of flame was impossible.

Two minutes more, and the bayou will be stripped of its fringe of reeds to the water's edge by that devouring billow of roaring, hissing, crackling flame!

CHAPTER XIV.

A FEARFUL MOMENT.

DEATH stared the two fugitives in the face—death by the flames. They could not flee; the water was beneath them, and the reeds around them. Oh, it was awful thus to perish. All the terrors of a lifetime were compressed into a moment's duration.

And the fire! It was a sight as grand as terrible; and, with blanched face and glaring eyes, Hawkeye Harry sat and gazed upon the mad wave that would soon envelop him and the fair being at his side.

"Oh, Harry! we will perish!"

The maiden's words started the youth from his stupor, and, as he gazed down into her face, now appearing ghostly in the lurid light, and saw her nestling closely to him, as if for protection, his manhood was aroused, and his usually quick inventive mind put to a terrible test.

He gazed quickly around. There was no possible chance of escape, but something must be done. His eyes fell upon Nora's shawl. Seizing it, he plunged it into the water, at the same time bidding Nora to throw herself in the bottom of the canoe.

The half-terrified maiden quickly obeyed, and the next moment she felt the wet shawl thrown over her form. She saw the youth's object—it was to save her.

"This is your only salvation, Nora," he said, and then reaching out he grasped several handfuls of sere dry reeds, and tore them from the water, and, drawing them over the canoe, he

great flakes, he spread it over the maiden, also permitting it to trail over each rim of the canoe to protect its sides from the flames.

The poor girl found herself unable to move under her wet, dripping cover of shawl and moss.

Setting his rifle in one end of the canoe, the youth bade Nora not to attempt to remove her protection until the fire had passed, then he sprang out into the bayou and hastened to secure himself.

On rolled the billow of flame, that gathered strength and volume as it advanced.

Close to the water's surface the dry reeds were shaven by the flame, which swept all before it like a scythe. No smoke hovered over the fire's trail. The wind drove it on, in advance of the flame. Behind the fire, the water was black with ashes and studded with a million tiny sparks that lingered upon the burnt stubs near the surface of the water only for a moment, then died out, leaving the darkness unbroken.

Close upon the fiery heel of the flame crept three canoes. Their occupants were savages—ten in number.

A light of fiendish triumph glowed in the small, basilisk eyes of that ten; and their half-nude forms and painted faces made them appear grotesque and demon-like in the glare of the burning reeds.

Eagerly they glanced over the surface of the water, where it had been cleared of reeds, for the canoe, or writhing forms of their hidden enemy.

Suddenly a cry of joy burst from their lips. The flames swept by a canoe that lay rocking like a cradle upon the surface of the water.

Like arrows the canoes of the savage fiends shot toward the little stranger-craft.

They ran alongside of it ere the fire was ten feet away. Eagerly they gazed within it. No sign of life was there. But in the front of the canoe reclined a rifle, whose barrel was glimmering with heat, and in the canoe and over its sides was a heap of moss, smoking with heat and steam.

Gray Hawk, second in rank to Black Buffalo, and his warriors sat motionless for several minutes, and gazed, in astonishment and baffled triumph, around them.

Where was the enemy that they had expected to find? They had not escaped from the reeds, for warriors had been posted all around the bayou.

Again the chief fixed his eyes upon the canoe and steaming moss, as though loth to believe that an enemy was not in it. Then, reaching out, he took hold of the moss and began dragging it out.

Little by little the warm and wet moss was removed from the craft and thrown overboard.

As the last of the moss was taken away a cry of surprise burst from the chief's lips. In the bottom of the canoe appeared the outlines of a human form wrapped in a red blanket or shawl.

Among the savages was the outlaw guide, Ulic Dubois, who had joined the Indians shortly after dark, having come directly from the camp of Henri Roche with the captain's message to Black Buffalo, who, with most of his warriors, had set off for his village, leaving Gray Hawk to continue the search for the maiden and Hawkeye. Dubois had remained to assist in the search, and no sooner did his eyes fall upon the red object in the canoe than he recognized it as the crimson shawl of Nora Gardette.

He at once reached out and pulled it away, and there, in the bottom of the canoe, they saw a prostrate and motionless form.

"It's her!" cried Dubois. "It's the gal, Gray Hawk, that the durned boy stole from our wagon."

"Waugh!" exclaimed the chief; "she's dead!"

"I b'lieve not, chief," returned Dubois; "she war well protected. The flames couldn't get to her through that moss and shawl, and both soakin' wet. Lift her up, chief; lift her up."

Gray Hawk sprang into the canoe and raised the motionless form in his arms.

A cry burst from his lips. She was not dead—the flames had not touched her, so swiftly did it pass by. She had swooned, no doubt from partial suffocation and fear.

The chief dipped up some water in the hollow of his hand and dashed it into her face, while Dubois produced a small flask of brandy, and poured a few drops of the liquid between her lips.

Signs of returning consciousness were at once made manifest, by a slight convulsion of the body.

But where now was young Hawkeye? Did not Henri Roche charge Black Buffalo to capture him at all hazards? The daring lad had

been in the reeds, and had secured Nora before he left. This they knew beyond the shadow of a doubt, for Dubois recognized the rifle found with the maiden as the same Hawkeye Harry had in his possession the night he came to their encampment on the prairie.

"Let my warriors search for Hawkeye," said the chief; "he is not far away; his hands laid the green moss over the maiden before he left. He is cunning as the fox, and is hard to kill. If he was cunning enough to save the maiden's life, he would not fail to save his own."

By this time the fire had reached the northern extremity of the bayou, and was dying out. But, in obedience to their chief's command, the warriors searched the bayou over for the young trapper, but their search was in vain. And at last, when the light of the burning reeds died out, they turned their canoes and struck for their encampment on the river-bank.

Slowly Nora Gardette came back to life, and when she had fully regained consciousness, she found herself upon a couch of blankets and skins before a glowing fire.

In trying to collect her bewildered thoughts and recall her situation, her mind reverted to Hawkeye Harry, and, uttering a low cry, she sprang to her feet.

A heavy hand was laid upon her arm, and a voice said, in a deep, guttural tone:

"Let the pale-face maiden rest easy. She cannot escape. She is in the power and the camp of Gray Hawk."

With flashing eyes Nora turned upon the savage. She saw her situation in a moment, but she did not give way under it. Scorn, defiance and indignation seemed to have gained complete ascendancy over her womanly fears and gentler emotions, the instant the savage spoke. She was surprised, herself, that she possessed so much courage and intrepidity.

For a moment she stood and faced the chief—faced him until he was compelled to shrink away; then her eyes turned and scanned each form around her with a look that spoke plainer than words.

But Hawkeye Harry was not there. Had he escaped the flames? She felt that he had, and a silent prayer of joy and thankfulness came up from her young heart.

In her inquiring glances and the faint smile that came to her lips, Gray Hawk seemed to have read the maiden's thought and emotions.

"You need not look for the young Hawkeye around our camp-fire. His body lies yonder in the bayou, and his scalp hangs at the girdle of Gray Hawk," and with a glow of hellish triumph upon his broad, painted, sensual face, he tapped, with his finger, a reeking scalp-lock that hung at his girdle.

But it was the last falsehood that Gray Hawk was destined to utter, for the next moment he uttered a low cry, and fell dead at the feet of the maiden.

CHAPTER XV. ON THE TRAIL.

At an early hour on the morning following the night of the events at the bayou, a party of horsemen broke camp on the great prairie many miles south of Boyer lake.

They were white men, and with a few exceptions were dressed alike—in the uniform of the United States Dragoons. They were well armed and mounted upon animals that showed they had been hard pressed.

At the head of the company, with long, regular and rapid strides, a man dressed in a suit of buck-skin guided the soldiers. His eyes sought the ground before him in a steady gaze, for he was following the wagon trail of Henri Roche.

In the rear of the company rode two persons whose garbs told they were civilians, and, judging from appearance, they were men unused to the exposure and hardships of the frontier. In fact this was the case. The eldest of the two was Calvin Gardette, the father of Nora. The other was a nephew of Mr. Gardette's, and a devoted aspirant to his cousin Nora's hand.

Richard Parker—this was the young man's name—had accompanied Nora and her father from Ohio to the fort, where they had been stopping with Major Gardette, Nora's brother. And when it was known that Nora was gone, Richard was the first to volunteer his services to penetrate the Indian country in search of her. The father had no objections to his attentions to his daughter, for he saw that the latter did not reciprocate his devotions beyond the bounds of an intimate friendship.

Richard was young—scarcely two-and-twenty—of an impulsive and enthusiastic nature, a free and dashing spirit.

"What think you, uncle?" he asked, as they

rode along, "has that wagon-track been made within the last two days?"

"It certainly has, Dick," returned Mr. Gardette; "at least our guide and scout say so, and they are versed in such matters."

"If so, we may come up with the enemy, be they Indians or white men, before night."

"Yes," replied Mr. Gardette; "but we may find then that we are following the trail of a party of honest traders. However, Lubin, the scout, is satisfied that the party we are following have got Nora. You know he figured the whole matter out very closely, and believes the abduction was arranged between a party of outlaws and the young scout, Ulric Dubois, who is now missing from the Post. The fact of finding Nora's hat in the river, and the edge of the bank crumbled off, and not her body, satisfied Lubin that she had been abducted, and these marks—the hat and crumbled bank—left to keep down suspicion of the facts. And from the course taken by the party after leaving the motte, where we just broke camp, the scout expressed fears that they were heading for old Rat Rouge's robberden. If so, I fear I will never see my poor child again."

"Well, uncle, we will soon know, if their trail is as plain all the way along as here."

"But, Dick, we may soon expect to have other dangers to encounter. The scout says we are getting into the Indian country now."

Here the conversation ended for the time, and the party moved on in silence, reaching the Boyer river a few minutes before sunset. Here the party went into camp.

In gazing around him for a suitable spot for a camp-fire, a cry of surprise suddenly burst from the lips of Lubin, the scout.

"What now, Lubin?" asked the lieutenant of the dragoons.

"The wagon-trail ends on this blessed spot, and that's what the rascals had their camp-fire," replied Lubin, pointing to a heap of ashes.

All saw that Lubin was correct in his statement; but the scout, not satisfied with this discovery, advanced, and with his moccasined feet scattered the ashes.

"By Jehockey! I see into it now!" he exclaimed; "the white rascals, hev burnt thar wagon up onto this very spot. Here's some o' the nails that says so."

"But where are the other irons? Surely they didn't burn them up," said a dragoon.

"No, but I'll bet ye'll find 'em in the river if ye'll jist take the trouble to look— See here!"

The scout picked out of the ashes several nails and screws, which satisfied every one that the wagon had been burned there, and the party had taken to the river or horseback.

While the pursuers were busy in picketing their animals to grass, and otherwise preparing for the night, Lubin was noticed to be very busy about the remnant of the camp-fire, and presently he announced another discovery.

He found that the ground under the ashes was broken and loose, and he was satisfied that the outlaws, if such they were, had buried something there, and to conceal the spot, had burned the wagon over it.

In a few moments, half a dozen men were upon their knees removing the dirt from the spot with their hands.

Down two feet from the surface of the ground they came to a wooden chest, bound with straps of iron.

Great excitement prevailed, and some of the party could scarcely wait until the chest was unearthed before they began forcing it open; this was accomplished, however, and then another excitement prevailed over the contents, which were quite numerous.

The first article taken from the chest was a map of the territory—nothing more. Then came a number of letters, all of which had been addressed to Henri Roche, and were written in cipher. Two or three of recent date were signed "U. D.," which all believed stood for Ulric Dubois, the *ci devant* scout of the fort.

In the bottom of the box were found plates, engravers' tools, various colored inks, and, in fact, every thing required by a band of successful counterfeiters and thieves.

This satisfied our friends that the party they were following was some of Rouge's robbers. Calvin Gardette groaned in spirit when he thought how probable it was that Nora was in the villains' power. He was anxious to move on that night, but his desire was overruled by Lubin, who informed him that it would not only be impossible to follow a trail, but decidedly dangerous.

"Thar's Injuns about, I'm satisfied," the scout said, "and then I ain't well enuff 'quainted

with these parts to foller a trail arter dark. Ye see, trailin', as a success, don't depend entirely on the plainness o' the trail, but one's knowledge o' the kentry, courses, creeks, and the dangers surroundin' 'em. Now, if we could run across a chap up in these diggin's called Hawkeye Harry, then we could travel day and night, fur they say it's a positive fact that that boy can see jist as well in the dark as a cat."

"Where does he live?" asked one.

"Bout ten miles from here. He's a free ranger or trapper, and a bold leetle dare-devil he is, too. He can skin a beaver or skulp a red-skin quicker than you can wink. He comes to the fort every onc't in a while to buy powder and shot, and sich like— Ah! what's that mean?"

The old scout's query was occasioned by the faint report of a rifle echoing through the woods and along the river.

"I reckon it's young Parker's rifle," said one; "he left camp soon after we halted to take a little hunt for deer or turkey."

True enough, Dick, as his uncle called him, was gone. In the excitement occasioned by the finding of the chest and its contents, all but the one man had failed to notice his absence.

"By Jehockey!" exclaimed Lubin, "I'd a' never let the younker left if I'd see'd him startin'. Ten to one he'll git his ha'r lifted afore he gits back—thar goes another rifle. The boy's in trouble! Come, half a dozen o' ye!"

The old scout seized his rifle and glided away down the river, followed by several of the dragoons. He found Dick's tracks along the beach, and followed them as rapidly as possible.

Half a mile below the camp he came to a sudden halt, while a cry of surprise burst from his lips.

"What is it, Lubin?" asked one of the soldiers.

"Moccasin-tracks!" exclaimed the scout; "I fear the lad's a goner— God of mercy! that tells the tale!"

He pointed to a fresh pool of blood upon the beach, and a broad, deep trail where something had been dragged over the sand to the river's bank.

"It's no use, boys, lookin' further. The red devils have killed him and thrown the body into the river. We've got to git back to the camp in a hurry and hev that fire put out. Come!"

They turned and hurried back to the camp with the sad news of Dick's disappearance. The fire was extinguished and guards posted all around the camp. But, despite their vigilance and excitement, the night passed away without the least alarm.

The following morning the party was in the saddle and moving forward upon the trail of Henri Roche and party, quite early, though not before some search had been made in vain for Dick Parker's body.

The sun was almost upon the meridian when the party debouched from the timber into the prairie.

The first object upon its undulating surface that attracted our friends' attention, was a solitary horseman, galloping in a north-westerly course.

They saw, by aid of a field-glass in possession of the lieutenant, that it was a white man, and he rode onward without appearing to see them.

He was too far away to be hailed by the voice, so the lieutenant took the bugle and gave a few sharp peals with it.

The horseman turned, drew rein and gazed toward the party as though to make out who they were—whether friends or foes.

To enlighten him the officer gave another blast upon the bugle, at the same time waving his cap above his head. Thereupon the horseman wheeled and galloped toward them.

When he was within a few rods of the party, old Lubin gave a shout of joy; then turning to his friends, said:

"Boys, we're in luck. That feller is Hawkeye Harry, the Boy Ranger."

CHAPTER XVI.

WHO WERE THEY?

BEFORE Old Optic could have time to fire upon Clouded Heart, Red Wing, who was standing by, struck up the muzzle of his gun, and the bullet whistled high above the masked stranger's head.

The old trapper quickly confronted the chief and demanded an explanation of his act.

"Would you slay a friend?" asked the chief.

"No!" retorted the trapper; "but I would slay an enemy. Didn't you see him makin' signs to them Injuns comin' out there?"

"I saw him wave a red scarf, but look through

the bushes, pale-face, and you can see that the approaching horsemen are *not* Indians."

"Not Indians!" exclaimed Old Optic, as he peered through the opening out into the plain. "By heavens, you are right, Red Wing! It is a party of dragoons, and at their head I see that noble boy, Hawkeye Harry! Whoop! whoop! hurrah!" and the old trapper bounded through the undergrowth out into the prairie, where he was met by Hawkeye Harry and the dragoons. "Hullo, my young friend!" exclaimed Optic; "you're still on foot, eh?"

"Yes; though I have had some pretty narrow escapes," replied the young ranger. "The redskins got me into a bayou last night, and tried to burn me out, and I only escaped by the skin of my teeth, just in time to sink a tomahawk into the brain of the Sioux chief, Gray Hawk. But what are you doing here, old friend?"

The youth dismounted as he asked the question, while Lubin, the dragoons and Mr. Gardette advanced and joined Red Wing and his warriors.

Old Optic briefly narrated all that had transpired under his observation since Harry had left the Cone, including the startling information of Clouded Heart.

"Then you're on your way to rescue your daughter?" said Harry, when he had heard the old trapper's sad story.

"Yes," replied the trapper.

"Then you can depend upon company and assistance, for these dragoons are going to the Sioux village to rescue the daughter of that elderly man on the white horse. I tell you, Optic, he is the father of the sweetest little woman I ever saw."

"Ah! oh, yes; certainly," laughed Old Optic. "But if she is a captive, how did you see her?"

The young ranger narrated his late adventures.

"And Optic," he continued, "I'll rescue that girl if I lose my own life by the act."

"In love!" said the old trapper; "crazy in love! But, Harry, I want you to keep your eyes upon this masked stranger of whom I told you awhile ago. He calls himself Clouded Heart, and I must admit he is clouded in a great mystery."

"I'll do so, Optic. Now let us see what I can see of the stranger."

The two fellow-rangers joined the Indians and dragoons, who had entered upon terms of friendship and good feeling.

Clouded Heart stood aside by himself, and, as they advanced, Hawkeye Harry noticed that he fixed his glowing eyes upon the old trapper, with a steady gaze.

For awhile he elicited much notice and curiosity from the soldiers and Mr. Gardette, but when they had learned of his sorrow through Old Optic, their attention became more of pity than curiosity.

A consultation was now held as to the proper course to pursue in rescuing the captives. The two parties had united their forces and were to act together thereafter.

They were now some ten miles from the Sioux village, and it was suggested by Hawkeye Harry that they remain in the timber until night, and then approach the enemy's stronghold under cover of darkness. The suggestion was no sooner advanced than acted upon, and in a few minutes the whole party had gone into a temporary encampment.

The day wore away quite slowly to some of the party, but by dusk every man was mounted and moving northward, guided by the young ranger and Lubin.

It was far in the night when a point on the prairie was reached, two miles from the Indian town. Here a halt was made for further consultation in regard to their course of action.

The suggestions advanced were many, and none but those of Hawkeye Harry and Red Wing coincided, and theirs was the one that all decided upon as the most likely to be attended with success.

They proposed to leave the horses with a strong guard, then steal forward on foot to the village, or close to it as they dare, without running into danger before they were prepared to meet it. If the warriors had all returned from their expedition, it was thought best not to make an attack upon the town until they had seen what could be accomplished in their favor by stratagem, the white man's first expedient.

The Indian town was located upon a small creek flowing from Lake Okibogie. To the north of it a steep, wooded bluff arose several hundred feet above the level of the valley, and extended down to the encampment, most of which was infolded within the shadow of the

woods. South of the village a long, treeless, shrubless plain rolled away in gentle undulations for many miles.

Hawkeye Harry and Red Wing took the lead toward the village. They crossed the creek a mile below the place, and after hours of toil reached a point in the woods, in the rear of the town.

A reconnaissance was now to be made, and the perilous job fell upon the Boy Ranger, Lubin, the scout, and Red Wing.

Leaving their friends, the three crept forward through the woods and soon gained a point on the hill, where they had a fair view of the town.

The hour was late, but there were many fires burning, and apparently every man, woman and child was astir.

"Thar's sumthin' up," whispered Lubin, "or the red imps would all be in bed."

"Yes, they have war-dance," said Red Wing.

"Yes, and they've got a white male prisoner, too," added Hawkeye. "Look, nigh that central lodge, tied to a post."

Lubin and the chief did as directed. At the same time a low exclamation burst from the lips of the old scout.

"By jinks!" he said, "that captive is Richard Parker! The boy weren't killed, arter all."

"He is the young man that Mr. Gardette was speakin' of, eh?"

"Yes. Heard 'em say at the fort he war the lover o' Gardette's gal."

Harry started at this information. Was it possible that Nora had a lover? The thought was a bitter one.

For some time the trio sat and watched the Indians moving about, apparently preparing for some exciting event. What was it? Were they going to torture Parker?

If such was the intention, the idea was suddenly abandoned, for they saw the prisoner taken to a lodge and guards posted around it.

Hawkeye Harry strained his eyes in hopes of getting a glance at Nora, but he was disappointed.

But he *did* see among the Indians, moving about in perfect freedom, Henri Roche and his men.

Gradually the savages retired and the campfires died out, but, between them and the camp, our friends saw a number of wary guards pacing to and fro upon their beat.

Red Wing proposed making a sudden attack upon the village in the dark. But Harry and Lubin opposed such a bloody course. They knew that the Fox warriors were thirsting for Sioux blood, and, if once under way, an indiscriminate massacre was sure to be the result.

"No, no, Red Wing," said the youth; "I hate a Sioux as bad almost as you do, but I'd never consent to see their women and children murdered. And if we should attack them and meet with a repulse, as I believe we would, then it would make matters worse. Let us be patient; but, bah! talk of patience to an Indian! But, boys, I've a plan in my head to rescue the prisoners, and if it should fail, nobody's scalp but my own would have to pay the forfeit."

"What is yer plan? Let's hear it," said Lubin.

The young ranger made known his plan of action.

"Ten to one ye'll git tomahawked," said Lubin.

Red Wing was silent, which was proof that he did not approve of the youth's project.

"I know it's dangerous, friends, but, if I lose my scalp, it won't be a serious loss. All I ask is your assistance or presence on the other side of the creek."

"Never fear; we'll be there," said Red Wing.

"We'll be there," repeated Lubin.

And together the two arose and crept softly away, leaving Hawkeye Harry alone to nerve himself for the execution of his dangerous and fearless undertaking—all for the sake of Nora Gardette.

CHAPTER XVII.

BEARDING THE LION.

NIGHT passed away, and the sun of another day dawned upon the village of Black Buffalo. Still the cunning Sioux knew naught of the foe that was environing their town, for all they were vigilant and scouts were constantly on the move.

Close to the edge of the stream that divided the wooded bluffs and great prairie, stood the lodge of Black Buffalo. Upon the south side of the stream was a steep, precipitous bank that guarded well the approach from that direction. In a semicircle around the chief's lodge, touch-

ing the stream above and below, the wigwams of the tribe were built with no little precision.

The chief's lodge was well guarded and he had no fear of danger, for a foe could not approach from the south, nor could he pass the line of *wick-e-ups* without being seen.

At an early hour on the morning in question, five men took their departure from the Indian town. They were Henri Roche and his men, starting back for the contents of the chest they had buried upon the banks of the Boyer.

The chief found himself alone in his lodge soon after the departure of the outlaws. The execution of the young male captive, Richard Parker, was to be postponed until Roche's return, consequently quiet and inactivity prevailed. The warriors lounged idly about their wigwams and slept in the warm sun. Only their squaws were busy, bringing water and fuel and dressing game of the previous day's chase.

But where was Nora Gardette? where was Gertie, the captive child of the old trapper? and where the child of Clouded Heart?

Ah! see yonder! Out from a neat-looking little lodge floats a being fair as the sun ever shone upon. Her skin is white, but her movements and manners, and gaudy, flashy ornaments and clothing, were those of an Indian. But seven years could change the habits of a child into those of an Indian princess. It must be Gertie, the child of Old Optic.

The young princess crossed the opening between the wigwams and the lodge of the chief, and approached the latter structure. At the door she was met by Black Buffalo.

"What does my white daughter want?" he asked. "I see that her face wears a cloud which tells me her heart is sad."

"My heart has always been sad, Black Buffalo," she said. "Ever since I was taken from my poor papa and mamma, I have known no happiness. But I came to intercede for the life of the prisoner yonder," and she pointed toward young Parker's prison-lodge.

The chief's brow clouded and a grim smile swept over his face.

"Then you love the pale-face prisoner?" he said.

The princess hung her head and blushed scarlet. The chief noted her emotions and continued:

"The pale-face youth shall die. You are to be the wife of the chief, called Roche, when three suns more go down. Waugh!"

The last exclamation was occasioned by the unceremonious intrusion of a figure wrapped in a great blanket, into the secret precincts of the chief's lodge.

Before the chief could utter a single word, the figure threw aside the blanket, and there, face to face with the great Black Buffalo, stood Hawkeye Harry, the ranger.

The brave youth had come to beard the lion in his den, and before the chief could recover sufficiently from his surprise, a revolver was leveled full at his head, and a firm, decided and unflinching voice said:

"Utter one word, Black Buffalo, that can be heard outside of this lodge and *you shall die!*"

The chief fairly staggered backward before the deadly fire of the youth's eyes. His great spirit was quelled by the deadly weapon pointed at his breast, by a hand he knew was never-failing.

"What does the pale-face—" the chief began in a low tone, but permitting his voice to grow higher with each word—"want here? Does he—"

"Stop!" commanded Harry; "not so loud! If by word or action *you* make my presence in this lodge known, I will shoot you dead!"

The chief was unarmed, and he saw that he was completely in the youth's power. It was over a hundred yards to the *wick-e-ups* of the warriors; the boy stood between him and the door of his own lodge, the flap of which was down; no sudden movement could defeat the youth's purpose, for his dark-gray eyes were fixed with a steady, unwavering gaze on his own black, scintillating orbs, and his finger was upon the trigger of the weapon.

"I come," the youth continued, after a moment's hesitation, "for all the captives in your hands."

"Ugh! hain't got any," replied the chief, in English.

"You lie!" exclaimed the youth; "within the last two days you have brought two, a man and woman, to your den. I want them; also, a captive or two that you have had for years—one named Gertie."

At this juncture a low cry burst from the lips of the Indian princess before him.

"Have you such a captive?" Harry continued.

"She stands before you," said the chief, "but she would rather stay with the red-men than go back to the pale-faces."

The youth glanced at the young princess and saw that she was not an Indian. His heart gave a joyous bound.

"Have you been a captive long, little princess?" he asked.

"Many years," she replied.

"Do you remember what your name is?"

"Oh, yes, sir! It was Gertie—Gertie Gray."

"And would you rather stay with these red-skins?"

"Not if I could go to my papa, or poor mamma."

"You can. Your father awaits you not far away."

"Oh, then I want to go to him! Poor papa, I almost forget how he looks."

"Then you shall go to him, little princess."

The brow of the chief clouded, and there was a convulsive twitching of the facial muscles, and a heaving of the chest, that told of the terrible emotions of vengeance and fear that were struggling within him.

"I know, chief," continued Harry, "it is a great damper on one's pride and manhood to be caught in such a fix as this. I got into your lodge—walked right through your village wrapped in that blanket, which I took from one of your guards last night when I took his scalp. But, I have come for all the captives in your town, and unless I get them you'll have to die."

"Have only that many captives," said the chief, holding up three fingers.

"Is that so, princess?"

There are only two captives besides myself," the maiden answered.

"Then I want them," said Hawkeye Harry.

"Black Buffalo will go bring them, then," said the chief, in a tone which our hero did not mistake.

"No, you must not leave this lodge. You might bring a pack of your warriors instead of the prisoners. No, no, chief, you can't catch me that way. Send this princess, and let her bring the captives here. She can tell the warriors that you sent for them. When they are here, then I will remove this revolver from its present dangerous position."

The face of the chief grew brighter, and Harry knew at once that he was meditating over some design to thwart his intentions. Turning to the princess, he said:

"Go, pale-rose, and bring the captives here. Let their hands be bound at their backs. Tell the warriors that I sent you, and for none of them to come until I bid them."

"That'll do, chief," said the daring young ranger, although he fathomed the meaning of the last three words.

With face radiant with joy, the little princess turned, and glided from the lodge."

In less than five minutes she returned, followed by Richard Parker and Nora Gardette. The latter was pale and sad, but when her eyes fell upon Harry, a cry of joy burst from her lips and a light of love beamed in her eyes.

The captives' hands were bound, but, by direction of Harry, they were untied by the princess.

"What is to become of us, anyhow, cousin Nora?" asked Dick Parker.

"Set at liberty," said Hawkeye Harry.

"Young man, take that rifle, tomahawk and lance that stand behind the chief, and then, with the princess and Nora, cross the stream to the prairie on the foot-log that spans it just south of this log. Go, and be quick."

Grasping the weapons, Dick Parker, followed by the two maidens, left the lodge and proceeded toward the stream where it was spanned by an uprooted tree.

At this juncture, a savage yell was heard along the line of wigwams. The warriors had been watching the chief's lodge, their suspicions of curiosity being aroused by the princess leading the two captives to the lodge. And when they saw Parker and the maidens, free and unguarded, moving toward the stream, something of the real truth of affairs flashed upon their minds, and seizing their weapons, they started, with a yell, toward the lodge.

Hawkeye Harry was startled by the yell, and the hellish gleam that was flashed from the eyes of the chief.

"The young pale-face has now got himself into a trap," the chief said, with a fiendish smile.

The youth backed from the lodge; then, turning, fled after the three captives.

With a war-whoop that sounded unearthly, Black Buffalo shot from his lodge and called to his warriors.

The four whites hurried across the creek on the log, and by command of Hawkeye Harry, threw themselves upon the ground in the tall prairiegrass.

The savages swarmed to the creek, and some of them had sprung upon the log to cross. But, at this juncture, fully three-score of forms arose from the grass on the opposite side of the stream, and poured a withering fire upon the savages. In dismay they recoiled, leaving a score of dead behind.

Then arose the war-cry of the Fox warriors under Red Wing, mingled with the triumphant shouts of the dragoons.

The Sioux fled beyond range of the enemy's rifles in the wildest confusion. Owing to the precipitous height of the bank upon which they stood, our friends did not pursue the foe.

Hawkeye Harry and his three captive friends now hurried back to the rear, where a little group of three persons were standing, holding a number of horses. They were Old Optic, Calvin Gardette and Clouded Heart.

Nora was clasped to her father's heart, and both wept tears of joy.

And Gertie Gray, the Indian princess, knew her father, Willis Gray, *alias* Old Optic, after many years of sorrow and separation; and their meeting was an affecting one. Then, from Gertie's lips, he listened to a long story of wrong and sorrow, in which Henri Roche was the chief actor.

It is unnecessary for us to repeat her story, for it proved a confirmation of the same story which Clouded Heart told the old trapper, the night he came to the Cone. After the first excitement of the meeting of fathers and daughters was over, Willis Gray, as we will henceforth know Old Optic, took Clouded Heart aside, and said to him:

"Clouded Heart, you have told me the truth. My darling wife, who I believed had deserted me for the love of another, was *true to me!* Gertie confirms your story! Cecil, my wife, was decoyed from home—captured and carried away into captivity by Henri Roche, for revenge. She was kept a slave for several years, and finally made her escape, but where she is Gertie does not know; and, Clouded Heart, I shall never rest day or night until she is found. For the information you gave me that has led to the rescue of Gertie, I thank you with all my heart, and am sorry that you did not find your child."

"I did find her, though, Willis Gray," replied the masked stranger.

"What!" exclaimed Willis Gray, "you found your child?"

"Yes: Gertie Gray is my child!"

"Oh, God! then you are Cecil, my wronged wife!" cried Gray, starting toward Clouded Heart.

The mask was thrown aside, and once again, after long years of heart-suffering, Willis Gray looked upon the face of Cecil Gray, his wife!

CHAPTER XVIII.

CONCLUSION.

Two days following the events just recorded, a casual observer might have seen a number of buzzards hovering over the forest, not far from the valley in which was the encampment of Red Wing. The filthy birds showed great anxiety in their movements, for now they settled down, down, as though ready to attack their quarry; then they would start up again with alacrity, and poise themselves high above the tree-tops upon airy wing, and with naked, coral necks out-stretched, watch below. But what were they watching? Was it a wounded deer or wolf?

No, it was a party of men. But why should the birds be watching them? Did their instinct tell them of the tragic scene that was about to be enacted there within the silent wood—a scene that would result in a banquet to them?

Let us see.

The party stood in a little opening, and in a circle around five other men who were bound hand and foot.

The prisoners—for such the bound men were—were Henri Roche and four of his men. Their captors were the dragoons, Hawkeye Harry, Richard Parker, and others. And the scene that was now about to be enacted was the execution of the robbers. A rope was around each one's neck, which told the manner by which they were to meet their end.

When Roche saw that the hand of justice had him within its iron grasp, from which there was no escape, his courage gave way, and, in hopes of mercy, he divulged many dark secrets.

He confessed his crimes in the separation of Willis Gray and his wife, the abduction of Nora

Gardette, and that he was Rat Rouge, the robber chief.

His object in abducting Nora was to exact a princely ransom for her restoration to her father, whom he knew to be a wealthy man.

But all his schemes of wickedness had failed, and he met his just rewards, along with his associates, there in the forest.

The execution is over. Henri Roche is no more. The party moves on, and those foul birds overhead settle down without fear. But they start up again, and soar away with apparent disappointment. They found no quarry in the woods, for the bodies of the dead had been interred by their executioners.

Upon the banks of the Boyer river, where Henri Roche had buried his chest, the dragoons went into camp on their return from the Sioux town. Here they concluded to remain a couple of days to rest their overworked animals before continuing their return to the fort.

Those two days were eventful ones in the lives of Hawkeye Harry and Nora Gardette. They walked along by the river, and talked of the hour so near at hand when they must part. They recounted their adventures together—spoke of their first meeting in the motte on the prairie, and the many trying dangers that followed their flight from the outlaws' camp. At last they spoke of the future. This led to the subject nearest each one's heart—love. With heaving breast and tremulous lips, Hawkeye Harry breathed forth the love that had been awakened.

And was his love reciprocated? How could it have been otherwise?

Ere they returned to camp, the young ranger had imprinted the first seal of love upon Nora's lips.

Where now were Richard Parker's hopes of the future? We answer: they were centered upon Gertie Gray.

In the meantime, Willis and Cecil Gray had wandered forth into the woods, to talk over bygone days, and recount their trials and troubles. It was on the evening of their second day's sojourn by the Boyer, and they were some distance from the camp, when Gray came to a sudden halt, as he caught sight of a thin column of blue smoke rising above the tree-tops a short distance before him.

"What is it, Willis?" asked his wife.

"Smoke. There must be a camp-fire out there, and it may be that of an enemy."

"No, it is not," replied his wife, with a smile. "You know, Willis, I told you I lived with brother Tom, after my escape from the Indians. I first met him in the woods near here. He was an object of despair, like myself. His family had all been murdered in the Spirit Lake massacre, and he was hunting the foe to wreak vengeance upon them. His home now is in a cavern under the ground, from whence that smoke is rising yonder. I have lived with him there just six months. It was he who first discovered that Old Optic was Willis Gray. But come, and I will show you the cave."

She led the way down to the edge of a little creek, and then, pointing to the opposite side, said:

"The cavern is directly under that bank, and extends out under the bed of the stream. That large basswood tree standing over yonder is hollow, with an opening far up among the branches. The hollow of the tree is open to the ground, and so connected with the cavern as to serve in an excellent manner as a chimney. It has puzzled a great many who saw the smoke, but could not tell from whence it came, and Hawkeye Harry is one of them."

"Yes; I remember now; he told me something of it a few evenings ago," said Gray; "but, where is the entrance to the cavern?"

"There are two entrances. One is concealed by a large flat stone overgrown with moss. The other, and the one brother and I mostly used, is under the bed of this creek!"

"What! you are jesting, Cecil?" said Willis Gray.

"I am not, Willis. Brother found that the cavern extended under the creek, and to make our situation doubly secure, he made an opening up through the center of the stream, which at that time was perfectly dry. He then fixed a frame with a kind of a trap-door over the opening, so that the water could pass over it, as it was on a level with the bed of the stream. When the door was down, and water in the creek, it washed sand and gravel over the trap, thus concealing its presence from view, and filling the crevices around the frame, so that no water could find its way through into

the cavern. When we wished to go out we pushed the trap upward, thereby turning the water from about the opening, and enabling us to make an exit, though we were always compelled to wrap a blanket or buffalo-skin around us to escape a thorough wetting, as much water found its way into the cavern when the door was up; the water, however, did not render the cave disagreeable, for it found its way out immediately, through a narrow passage opening into the creek at the foot of yon rapids. My object, Willis, in staying in the place was to be near you, and search for our child, whom I lost track of after leaving the tribe, and of whom I never heard until the day I worked the secret from Henri Roche, by pretending I was dying," and Cecil Gray laughed at the remembrance of that meeting with the outlaw.

At this juncture a low exclamation burst from Gray's lips, as he fixed his eyes upon the bed of the creek before him.

He saw something thrust upward in the water, revealing a small cavity through which a dark, hairy form suddenly appeared.

"'Tis brother!" cried Cecil. "Tom! Tom!"

The form leaped from the opening, threw aside its hairy robe, and the next instant Willis Gray grasped his brother-in-law, a tall, sad-looking man, by the hand.

When Cecil and her husband returned to camp on the Boyer, her brother went with them, with the determination of leaving the country forever.

Hawkeye Harry now received an explanation of the mystery of the smoke ascending from the basswood tree, and the hairy form he saw rise from the bed of the creek and slay the Indian, and Tom was indeed the "Unknown." The young ranger was not a little surprised when he learned, also, that the occupants of the cave knew of his presence by the creek that night.

But with this mystery we are done.

The party resumed their journey to the fort, and reached the point in due season and in safety.

And now came the "tug of war"—the parting of friends and lovers. But, with the renewal of pledges and love vows, in tears and entreaties, the separation took place.

Calvin Gardette and his daughter, Willis and Cecil Gray and their daughter, all departed for the East, as also did Richard Parker.

Hawkeye Harry remained at the fort, but it was only for a short time. A year later found him in one of the leading Eastern schools, and still a few years later he went to the home of Nora Gardette, and claimed a fulfillment of their vows made years ago upon the banks of Boyer river.

With his young wife Harry Houston went West, where he laid the foundation of wealth, prominence, and the best of all, a joyous and happy life.

Richard Parker married Gertie Gray, and theirs was a life as bright and full of sunshine, as the life of Gertie's parents had been dark and clouded.

THE END.

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